NEW WORLDS SCIENCE FICTION

January 1963

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Dawn's Left Hand

Lan Wright

New Serial



- ROBERT PRESSLIE
- PHILIP E. HIGH
- GORDON WALTERS
- DAVID JAY
- R. W. MACKELWORTH



The Subliminal Man

J. G. Ballard

Production gone mad





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Editor: JOHN CARNELL

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Guest Editorial

One of our newest—and certainly the youngest—professional writer in the science fiction field has some forthright comments to make on the subject of professionalism within the genre.

I LIKE IT HERE

by DAVID ROME

It's a funny thing really—but I like to think of myself as a science-fiction writer. I mean, when people ask me what I do for a living, I tell them I write science-fiction. I don't tell them I also do some True Love, some Men's Adventures, and some articles. I don't tell them that if I was living on what I earned from science-fiction, I'd be hungrier than Tiny Tim. I'm actually proud of being connected with the medium—and that's what they find strangest of all.

I sometimes think—after I've spoken the conversation stopping words—that I might have made a slip. I try to recall if I've accidently said I'm fond of *Noddy*, or *Big Ears*. But I

never have. It's just the way they look that fools me.

A couple of days ago, I bought some volumes of Weird Tales and Thrilling Wonder Stories, bound in hard covers. I brought them home on the bus . . . but I couldn't wait until I got behind closed doors to read them. I opened Volume I to a Henry Kuttner story, "Hollywood on the Moon," a tastyenough morsel, even without the two-page illustration that enhances it.

There's no need to tell you the kind of looks I got that time. You know—you're in the same boat. If you haven't slunk off a bus, or a train, with your favourite s-f magazine hidden inside your coat, then you haven't yet begun the usual apprenticeship that blights the road to addiction.

The s-f reader is a missit in society . . . And he always will be, unless we get an irruption of new talent into the field, break up the stuffy convention atmosphere, get rid of the translation

machine, psionics, and the cliquish jargon . . .

So we're told.

I've learned a lot of things since I took the plunge into freelancing, two years ago. I've learned the cheapest time of year to take a holiday, the cheapest way to travel from here to anywhere else. I've learned about editors, and markets, and the manager of my bank. But most of all, I've learned about trends.

Now, there's a trend—and a word—that's popular these days; and you hear it, or you read it, just about everywhere you go in the s-f world. The word is *Mainstream*. Mainstream, meaning big, broad flow of letters. Mainstream, meaning literature.

Only I don't spell it with an M, an A, an I, an N, an S, a T, an R, an E, and A, an M. I spell it DISSOLUTION, and the

connotation here is COMPETITION.

Any writer—pro or otherwise—is interested in word rates. And any writer knows that s-f isn't what he'd call a *profitable* market. No Mark of Cain on editors here. We know they can't afford to pay us more.

Why not?

Because we're not on Mainstream, where the circulations run to millions—where a writer can be paid £500 or more, for

one short story.

But an s-f writer is a funny kind of character. He's not—O.K. I know there are exceptions—a dab hand with the niceties of phrase. He's not a Bates, a Thurber, or a Maugham, and sniping at his crudity is jolly fun for highbrow 'slummers.' But it has about as much validity as shooting down a fourth-division footballer because he doesn't play the game as well as Jimmy Greaves. The s-f writer doesn't claim to be a figure of real literary standing!

But he *thinks*; he works; he has a real belief in what he's doing. And he's satisfied to take whatever payment editors

can offer him.

"Dreaming when dawn's left hand was in the sky I heard a voice within the tavern cry, 'Awake, my little ones, and fill the cup Before life's liquor in its cup be dry '."

Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam

DAWN'S LEFT HAND

by LAN WRIGHT

Part One of Three Parts

one

"You must fasten your seat harness for takeoff, sir."

The attendant's voice forced its way into Regan's consciousness dragging him back from his reverie, and the tone of it said very clearly that the girl wasn't used to repeating herself. Regan glanced up at her tight-lipped face with its cold expression of irritation that said, "Stupid colonial," as plainly as if she had spoken out loud.

"Oh, yes. Of course." His hands fumbled hastily at the safety harness which would hold him securely in its grip for the short duration of the journey to the orbit station. In his hurry to comply he made a mess of it, and the girl had to lean down

to correct his mistakes.

Regan was aware of the other passengers watching his discomfiture, and he wanted to say, "This is the hundredth ferry jump I've made—not the first." But, of course, it would do no good.

On the other side of the catwalk his gaze met the twinkling brown eyes of his nearest neighbour, a plump man with a bald head and a fleshy mouth that spoke of its owner's soft living and heavy indulgence. The plump one smiled at him and shrugged as well as his own harness would allow.

"It happens."

Regan grinned tightly in reply. Yes, it happens, but did the wretched girl have to make such a picnic of it? Stupid colonial! He looked up as she snapped the final clip into place with an unnecessary jerk, and opened his mouth to say, "Thank you," but she had turned away along the catwalk with a flounce of her lithe body that told clearly what she thought of ignorant passengers who didn't know enough to come in out of the rain—or to fasten their safety harness.

Regan relaxed and listened to the familiar build-up of sounds as the ferry prepared to lift from the pad. The upward movement came at last, gently, like the slow pressure of a giant hand, but never more than that. The slow increase of acceleration wasn't enough to cause more than the slightest discomfort.

The berthing at the orbit station was just as uneventful, and as he went through the lock with the other passengers, Regan smiled slightly as he realised for the hundredth time that he had come ten thousand miles out from a planet and he hadn't yet seen a star. The formalities of the quarantine control and the travel bureau passed quickly and efficiently. His travel documents gathered a few more stamps and a few more pinprick impressions before he was directed across the vast central hall of the orbit station to the embarkation port for the Ferroval cruiser.

He felt almost thankful as he crossed the short distance between the station and the ship, for the Ferroval cruiser was a colonial vessel, built and crewed by Ferroval-born terrans. The stiffness of Earth fell away like an unwanted cloak; the cold barely concealed impatience that was the built-in trademark of the upper class terran was behind him now, and he could relax in the slower, more friendly tempo of the ship's life. Even terrans outward bound from Earth would relax a little as he knew from past experience, and by the time the nine day trip was over they would have lost their starchy veneer and descended to the more friendly level of colonial life.

Inside the entry port an officer compared his credentials with a printed list, handed them back with a smile, and said, "Cabin seventy-three, sir. You are sharing it with a Senor Cabrera."

"Thank you." Regan tucked the dockets into his pocket and followed the blue-clad steward along the grey tube that was the ship's main corridor. The man halted before a bleak sliding door that had the figures '73' in white upon its grey surface.

"Your luggage will be along shortly, sir."

Regan nodded, "Thank you." After the awkwardness aboard the ferry it was good to be back aboard the ship and in an atmosphere with which he was familiar. He slid the door back and stepped into the small oblong room that would be his home for the next nine days, and as he entered a figure straightened up from the bottom berth. Regan gazed in mild surprise at the plump face of the man who had smiled at him in the ferry.

"Ah, Senor Regan!" The fat lips parted in a moist smile.

"I regret I have beaten you to it."

Regan blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

"Cabrera-Manuel Cabrera-"

"Oh, yes. Of course. The-er-officer told me." Regan

smiled. "You were saying?"

"The superstitions of space, Senor Regan." Cabrera spread his hand towards the bottom berth. "I have beaten you to it—I have the bottom berth."

"Oh, I see." Daylight dawned and Regan laughed out loud. "I'm not that superstitious. You are welcome to the

bottom berth, Senor."

"Then we are both happy," smiled Cabrera, and turned again to his arrangement of the berth.

Regan wondered idly how such an idea had been born that it was lucky to have the bottom berth. Probably in the fact that one hit the escape capsule just that fraction of a second quicker should there be trouble or danger to the ship. It didn't happen often but there had been cases where a starship had been so badly damaged that the survival capsules had been shot off into space, and, when you dived for your berth, you dived into a ready-made rescue unit that closed around you like a cocoon, and was ejected violently as the danger level reached a certain critical point.

If trouble came fast the survival capsule would see you through, but if you were too slow in reaching it—you were dead. In theory it was easier to hit the bottom berth than the top, and that—as far as Regan could see—was the foundation for the fat man's superstition, that and the fact that Cabrera was probably too lazy to hoist his bulk the few feet upwards that was necessary to reach the top.

The door buzzer sounded, light and muted, and Regan slid it open to find the steward holding his one light travelling case.

He offered the man a tip and closed the door again.

Cabrera straightened from his berth and waved a plump hand towards the top one. "I will leave the way clear, senor," he said. "No doubt you have things to unpack."

"A few," agreed Regan. "If you've finished?"

"Of course." Cabrera seated himself in one of the two easy chairs, and produced a large, black cigar. He lit it and puffed the pungent aroma of a sweet smelling, off-world tobacco across the cabin. The size and scent told Regan that it was probably very expensive.

Cabrera smiled as he saw Regan glance at it. "My last before we reach Ferroval, Senor Regan. Will you join me?"

"Thank you. No."

"It is your loss. These are from Kleebor-"

"The Paradise Leaf?" Regan's eyebrows lifted in surprise, and his former valuation of expensive was multiplied a hundred

times to priceless.

"The good things of life are expensive," said Cabrera, because they make life worth living. Money, as an old philosopher once said, has no use save to ease the road along which we must travel."

On every trip, thought Regan, there has to be at least one amateur philosopher. Aloud, he said, "Another philosopher declared that the manner of our living was more important

than the possessions we collected."

"If he said that, he lived in poverty and died a martyr. He was not a philosopher—he was a fool." Cabrera blew another cloud of pungent smoke across the cabin. "Tell me, Senor Regan, did you enjoy your stay on Earth?"

"No," said Regan shortly.

"My planet is not a pleasant one for colonials. It has many faults which are inexcusable and can only be cured by making it compulsory for every one of its people to spend a year travelling around the colony worlds. Only then will there be any true understanding. We are too insular, Senor Regan, too easy to see the faults of others while we ignore our own. That attendant on the ferry is a case in point. Her attitude was inexcusable and yet it is one that could easily be altered by transferring her to the starships for a year or two. Tell me, senor, you are travelling on business?"

The question came so suddenly and unexpectedly that Regan replied before he realised it. "Yes, I am an agent for the Universal Export Agency—" and then he cursed himself for falling into Cabrera's well laid trap. The man's attitude annoyed him beyond measure, and, under other circumstances, he would have done anything to avoid passing on details of his personal business.

He looked quickly at the fat man, but Cabrera was busy examining the glowing end of his cigar, apparently unconcerned

by Regans reaction.

"A company with a fine record, senor. You should be proud to work for them. I have had many dealings with them

in the past-"

From the grey bulkhead the intercom unit announced, "Flight departure imminent. Ship's standing regulations are now in force. Passengers are requested to comply with the conditions of travel with which they were provided when making their reservations."

Cabrera sighed and took a long pull at the cigar. "Such a pity. Perhaps if the captain knew that I had another half hour of enjoyment he would postpone the departure." Idly, he pushed the still smoking butt into the waste disposer. "You

are staying on Ferroval, senor?"

Regan shook his head, his attention still on the chore of unpacking his few light belongings. "No, I shall take ship for Janosir as soon as it can be arranged."

"Of course. Your company headquarters."

" And you?"

Cabrera shrugged. "My movements are fluid. Ferroval is a good world. Perhaps I shall stay there for a short while. It will be pleasant to rest after the speed of my own planet. You will admit, Senor Regan, that a long stay on Earth is hardly a rest cure."

In other words, thought Regan, mind your own damned business. Aloud, he said, "No. I was glad to leave." He turned away from his berth satisfied that his small array of clothing and personal effects was safely stowed. All he wanted now was to get away from Cabrera for a short while. The man was too demanding to be pleasant, and Regan disliked the way in which he managed to worm information from him, without giving away the slightest hint of his own business.

"I think I will take a meal," he told Cabrera, and then,

reluctantly, "will you join me?"

Cabrera shook his head. "Thank you, no, senor. I dined

before the ferry left Earth."

Regan nodded. "All right. I'll see you later." He left the cabin with over-riding thought in his mind. Cabrera was scared to leave the proximity of his berth for any length of time. His tale of the 'superstitions of space' had nothing to do with it; the plain fact was that the plump little terran would be anchored as close to the cabin as circumstances would allow for the whole of the trip to Ferroval—and Regan had a small bet with himself that Cabrera would have his meals served there too.

Apart from his desire to stay in the cabin Manuel Cabrera was a pleasant companion. True, he was secretive about himself, but he had a vast fund of knowledge and reminiscence. He could talk well and with a latin eloquence that was both descriptive and entertaining. His carefully groomed hands were as eloquent as his tongue, and Regan found himself liking the man despite his early reservations that Cabrera was an inquisitive terran as well as an amateur philosopher.

His one regular excursion from the cabin which was his self-

appointed prison, was in the early morning, ship time.

"The best thing in the world, Senor Regan, is to begin the day refreshed, and that is something that no amount of sleep,

on its own, can accomplish."

And promptly at eight hundred ship time he left the cabin to spend twenty minutes under the hard, cold jets of the needle shower, while Regan rose, dressed, and embarked upon a more sedate and less vicious form of preparation for the day ahead.

The morning of the fourth day was no exception.

two

Regan's last waking memory was of the clamour of the alarm bells—a sound that lasted a bare second before it dissolved and was lost in a holocaust of roaring noise and flame. He never did recall the reflex action that flung his screaming body towards the bunk that was also the survival capsule. He was unconscious from shock and pain as it closed around his seared and tortured body, and then threw itself clear of the exploding mass of metal that had been, bare seconds before, a sleek and shining product of human ingenuity. He was saved the body-wrenching shock of transversion from hyper to normal space; and, apart from brief, pain-wracked moments of semi-conscious delirium, he knew nothing of the long hours that his capsule nurtured the dim spark of life while it sent forth its micro-second call for aid.

The blackness was still with Regan when he awoke at last, but the pain was not. The blackness was of the eye and not of the mind, and for that he was thankful. His body was compressed and comforted in an all-embracing nest of yielding softness that was like a vast mother-womb so close did it enfold him. There was peace and clean air around him; a nondescript something that spelt 'hospital' in large letters. That fact alone was enough to calm him in his waking panic. He was alive; he was in good hands; he was being cared for; that was sufficient. His logical mind accepted these major factors in his present existence and rejected all others until such time as the necessity

for considering them arose.

He moved slightly, tentatively, and at once a voice said, "Can

you hear me?"

His mouth was dry and unresponsive, and his jaw seemed to be confined by whatever enveloped the rest of his body. He managed a weak, muffled, "Yes," and the sound echoed in his

ears like a whisper from the grave.

"Good." The voice was not human, that fact registered at once. There were sibilants and gutterals in the few words he had heard that placed it as being of non-human origin. "You have been in a bad accident, but you are safe and being well cared for. Your body has been badly damaged but that can be repaired. Indeed, those repairs are already in hand. You are on the planet Lichar, and we will return you to your own people as soon as that is possible. Do you understand?"

The speech was short and to the point. It contained everything that a man in Regan's position needed to know without being too difficult for his shattered mind to assimilate. There was information and encouragement, and most important, there was reassurance.

Regan managed a husky, "Yes."

"Good. You will sleep now, and when you awaken next

you will feel stronger."

Whatever it was hit him like a falling tree. He was back in a world of mental blackness before he realised it, and waking again was so rapid that he might have been asleep for barely a second.

This time it was much better. The haziness was gone from him and some of the feeling was back in his body-enough to tell him that there was still pain and discomfort to be felt, that his extremities weren't in the condition that they ought to be. A dull ache spread from his shoulders and his hips right through his arms and legs, and there was a lightness about his limbs that was quite unnerving. He tried to move them—there was no response—except that the voice said, "Good, you are awake. Do you feel stronger?"

"Yes." Even to himself Regan's voice sounded better.

"Strong enough to talk a little?"

"Yes-yes, I think so."

"That is well. First, we have notified your survival to the Terran authorities on Kleinewelt—that is the nearest Terran world. They will send a vessel for you as soon as we think you are well enough to be moved. You understand?"

" Yes"

"We have given details of your identity so that your family can be informed. In the meantime, until you are well enough to be moved, it has been agreed that we should look after you as best we can. Later, your own medical specialists can complete the task of getting you properly well."

" I see."

"And now, I will leave you to rest naturally. There will only be sleep drugs for you if you find too much pain. If you want anything I shall be here, watching you."

"One thing." Regan's lips were dry and his head was cold. "One thing—my eyes."

"You will be able to see again-do not worry."

In the silence that followed one fact only mattered to Regan. It was unlikely that he was going to die, and he would not be blind. Clearly, he was in a bad way physically, but that could be overcome by modern techniques and surgical reconstruction. It would take a long time, but it would be done.

Then the second fact hit him.

The Licharians were methane breathers of a heavy gravity world, and their only contact with the terran-dominated portion of the Galaxy was for trading purposes. That apart, the two races had nothing in common, no single point of contact—there was nothing for them to fight about, no dispute and no agreement beyond that point where trade was profitable to them both. Planets which were of interest to one race were of no use to the other, and trade between them was limited to such mineral requirements as each one could produce that the other could not.

Therefore, Regan decided, there was no Licharian seated beside him waiting for each movement of his wrecked and shattered body. In all probability he was in a sealed chamber, nurtured and cosseted by remote control, with a large-eyed, hard-skinned alien looking at him through a thick, plastic window, and talking to him through an intercom unit.

The information, as such, was unimportant. What was important so far as Regan was concerned, was the fact that he was capable of remembering and collating his recollections to form a coherent pattern of his environment. At least his mind was clear and undamaged, whatever his physical state might be.

Once more he slept, this time a deep and natural sleep unaided by whatever drug had previously been used to plunge him into the dark abyss that had about it more of death than of sleep. Regan slept and dreamed, and his mind gave up its fears and its subconscious knowledge, while his body shuddered and cried out. He awoke with the coldness of fear upon him, and with the despair of realisation in his mind.

The sibilant Licharian voice said, "You have slept well. How

do you feel?"

Regan drew a long, shuddering breath. "How many others have been rescued?"

There was a long silence while the alien considered the question. Rather, thought Regan, he was considering the effect of his answer on the mind of a broken and shattered being. "How many?" he insisted.

"None. You are the only one of which we know."

In his dreams Regan had expected no other answer and so he was not surprised. His last conscious second aboard the ship had borne enough horror to tell him how severe had been the explosion which ripped apart the body of the vessel. He thought of Cabrera—away from the cabin for just that vital portion of time which had cost him his life; of the laughing, dark-haired stewardess who had served his food in the ship's lounge; of the chubby second officer whose last trip it had been before retirement. Cabrera . . .

" Are you all right?"

"Yes. Yes, I am all right." He felt his body tremble under the urgency of the new question that he needed to ask. "Tell me, how did you know what to tell the terran authorities about my survival?"

"Why, from your belongings."

"My belongings?"

"Yes, they were carefully stored in compartments of the

capsule."

"Then—" Regan gulped as the implication of his thoughts grew clearer. "Then you were able to tell them who I was?" "Of course."

Regan recalled once more the shrill clamour of the alarm, the sudden screaming agony of pain that hit his body, the desperate reaction that had sent him leaping for the survival capsule—it had been the bottom berth. Dully, he said, "You told them my name was—was Manuel Cabrera!"

"That is so. No doubt your family will be glad to know that

you are alive."

Such a simple thing, thought Regan, so easy to undo the damage that had been done. How were they to know any different? Even if there had been photographs of Cabrera in the documents they found there was nothing for them to connect the broken, battered body of Martin Regan with any

other person than Manuel Cabrera.

"Listen, there has been a mistake. I—I am not Cabrera. My name is Regan—Martin Regan. You see, Cabrera had the bottom berth, and he was out of the cabin when—when it happened. I just threw myself into the nearest capsule." The words rushed from his mouth. "You must tell them before his relatives are notified. It will be terrible if they think that he is still alive."

"Quietly, quietly! You must not excite yourself." There was a pause. "I will pass on what you say, but it may not be so easy to rectify the error—we shall have to see what can be done."

"What-what do you mean?"

"You see, you have been here for many weeks—almost two hundred terran days. The news of your rescue was passed at the beginning, and the family of Manuel Cabrera will already have been told."

Regan lay stunned! Over six months had passed! He had thought that only a few days had elapsed, and now an alien voice had broken the illusion. For six months Martin Regan had been dead to the Galaxy outside, and Manuel Cabrera had lived on in the minds of his friends and relatives. The superstition that Cabrera had possessed had not been enough to save him—but it had prolonged his life in the minds of others. A few pieces of paper, a few private possessions, these had been the trappings of identity that had buried Martin Regan and had kept alive the memory of Manuel Cabrera.

And now, Regan was reborn and Cabrera was buried.

three

The hours passed in dark solitude save for the ministrations to his broken body that the Licharians managed to perform by remote control. Gradually, he learned things. As he grew stronger he carried on short conversations with the unseen Licharian, and from each he gleaned a piece of information. At first he thought he was gaining knowledge by virtue of his own cunningly contrived questions, but as time passed he realised that the information was fed to him in easily assimilated doses which finally built up to an overall picture of frightening proportions. By the time his knowledge was complete his mind had already prepared itself for the worst, and over the days and weeks the picture was created piece by piece much as he had already anticipated.

His face was a blind, fleshless mask without ears, eyes or nose. Both hands were gone, and so were his legs below the knees. The back part of his body was a one hundred per cent mass of third degree burns, but the front had been partially saved by the fact that he was already leaping for the survival capsule when the blast hit him. Another fraction of a second

and Martin Regan wouldn't have been alive to talk about it. The capsule had nursed him and protected him for five days until he had been picked up by a Licharian ship that had homed on the high-speed distress signals emitted by the tiny chamber. His life had been saved, and now came the months of rehabilitation and rebuilding that would see him fit and whole again.

Regan knew that he had been too far away from surgeons of his own race for them to have done him any good at all—and the aliens had been forced by circumstances to do what they could for his shattered body. They had been forced to improvise, and their surgeons had adapted and grafted, cut, shaped, strengthened, rebuilding on the slenderest of foundations a new body with new limbs. In the protective womb of the small cell that was his immediate world Regan waited and grew strong.

The weeks passed, bringing nearer the time when he was well enough to be taken from the planet Lichar, and when at last the day arrived Regan surprised even himself at the depths of his emotions as he felt himself being lifted by space-suited figures, and eased gently into an airtight stretcher for removal to the

ship.

The comforting pat of a heavy, metalled hand on his shoulder, and the booming, radioed voice which said, "Soon have you aboard," awakened within him a stir of emotion that he hadn't known since he was a child. The days and weeks and months of isolation were behind him now; he hadn't realised how lonely he had been in that dark, soft world, with only an alien metal voice for company. Only one thing mattered now—he was back among his own kind.

Early on, after his transfer to Ferroval, the surgeon in charge of his case had told him, with careful nonchalance that, "You won't be quite normal physically, you must realise that. The Licharians did a very remarkable job on you with the limited knowledge at their disposal. They had to use resources which were—to be blunt—very limited, and there are certain anomolies from the terran norm which we shall not be able to correct

after this long time."

In the blindness of his world Regan chuckled coldly. "I've had plenty of time to think about it, doctor," he replied. "They could hardly rebuild bone and muscle, arms and legs without the basic material to work with. What did they

use? String and wire?"

The doctor laughed. "Not exactly. They adapted some of their own prosthetic material to the reconstruction of your limbs. They adapted neural connections between the nerve ends of your—ah—extremities—"

"Stumps," Regan corrected him brutally. "I'm adjusted to

the facts of life, doctor."

"All right then—stumps. In point of fact, although you will be able to feel and to use your arms and legs just as if they were your own, your blood circulation ceases once the prosthetic material begins. We have examined the neural linkages in the operating theatre and we're pretty confident from your reactions that they will be as sensitive and flexible as were your own."

"You mean I'll be able to walk, run, live a normal life?"

"That's it. In fact your new limbs will probably have more endurance than the old ones because they are not tied in with your blood stream and nervous system. You will walk and run by remote control, rather like having someone else do all the work for you."

"Well, that's something," said Regan. "Now, after the

good news you can tell me the bad."

There was slight pause. "The bad?" repeated the doctor tentatively.

"Yes, the bad," insisted Regan. "What about my eyes? Do I get to see again? The Licharians said that I would."

"Why, yes, of course. Nothing to worry about there."

"Then where did they get them from?"
"I'm afraid I don't understand—"

"The eyes," Regan explained patiently, "to replace the ones I lost. They had to get them from somewhere—and quickly. I know enough to realise that they couldn't wait until I was back in terran hands again, they had to do something—and

quickly."

"Oh, quite a simple matter as I understand it. They adapted their own optical lenses to provide you with a new pair of eyes. They are not—er—well, quite normal you will appreciate, but the neural linkages they used are quite remarkable. They provided us with details of the theories they used in making the adaptation, and we are pretty sure that they worked on sound principles."

"Fine," said Regan. "But will I be able to see."

" As far as we can tell—yes."

"In other words, you don't know."

The doctor hesitated.

"Look, doctor. I know I'm lucky to be alive," snapped Regan, stifling the panic which threatened to rise up and overwhelm him. "The Licharians have experimented, and neither you nor they know what the result will be. Right?"

"That is substantially correct."

"All right. When shall I know the worst?"

" Not for some weeks, I'm afraid."

There was little comfort for Regan in that pronouncement. The one fact that did comfort and reassure thim was the messages and tape letters that came to him from time to time from his family and friends on Caledon-his home world. It was comforting to lie and listen to their familiar voices, or to hear the written messages read to him by a doctor or nurse. There were, too, messages of goodwill from people he couldn't place: men and women whose familiarities were warm and pleasant but whose names he couldn't place or fit into the pattern of his former life. He puzzled over some of them, trying to fill the apparent gaps in his memory, and at odd, frightening moments of depression he wondered if perhaps his mind had been affected by the ordeal through which he had passed. From this fear alone he protected himself by refusing to admit to the doctors that there might possibly be anything wrong.

Physical injury he had learned to accept, but the possibility

of mental hurt—that was something else again.

He accepted everything, new friends and old, as bright gaps in the darkness that enveloped him, and he replied to them all with a verbosity that threatened to overwhelm the tape resources of the hospital.

The hours and days slid past, and rigid muscles, unused in long months, moved beneath his new baby flesh. He winced and groaned long and often in the agony of adjustment because there was a limit to what could be done with pain-killing drugs when it was essential that the patient should be conscious..

His greatest thrill was the first dim light that filtered through his new eyes on the occasion when the bandages were first lifted in a darkened room. There were no shapes, only a dim, grey, light—but the thin light of hope was reborn. As the days ran into weeks the light grew stronger and faint outlines appeared; the flesh and muscles knitted more firmly and grew stronger under the impress of remedial exercises. The old combined with the new, and at last Martin Regan took the first tottering

steps of his rebirth.

As he sat in a chair in the hospital grounds Regan could feel the heat of the Ferroval sun warmly upon him—there was the smell of clean earth and the tang of strange scents in his nostrils. His eyes, still heavily shaded and protected, were growing stronger, that much he could tell from their agility beneath the new grafted lids that fluttered as delicately as had the old.

A step near at hand caught his attention, and he turned

towards the sound.

"Ah, you are awake." He recognised the voice of Lippman,

the head surgeon. "I thought you might be dozing."
"No, just thinking." Regan stretched his arms, wincing at the aches which still seeped through his muscles.

"It is bad to think too much," said Lippman.

"You mean I might become morbid?" Regan laughed and shook his head. "I have too much to be thankful for. I am alive, I am able to move around. I-" The implication of Lippmans comment hit him like a douche of cold water. "What did you mean by that remark, Doctor ?"

There was a pause, then Lippman said, "We are going to remove the bandages and shades entirely today, Regan. This will be the final test of your sight."

Regan felt his heart turn over and his stomach tighten with

sudden fear. "You mean-?"

"We have done all we can. We know that light is reaching your sensory nerve centres, but we do not know how efficient your new optical organs will be when used in conjunction with the old optic nerve and the normal human areas of sensory perception."

"You mean that I may never be able to see more than I do

now?"

"Not at all. If necessary we shall have to resort to more

artificial means-"

Regan laughed harshly and with a note hysteria that wasn't lost on his panicky mind. "I've seen them, Lippman, black boxes that weigh several pounds and have to be carried in a case or laid upon a table."

"Still, you would see."

Regan gestured angrily. "Let's get it over with. Where will you do it? Here?"

" No, in your room."

Regan lifted himself awkwardly from the chair and linked his arm through Lippman's. The walk to the hospital and up the one flight of stairs to his room felt like the final walk of a condemned man. He sat in a chair and relaxed as well as he could

Lippman's calm voice said, "Close the blinds, nurse," and Regan heard the whine of the tiny motor that slid the shades across the wide frame of the window. Even the greyness was gone now. He felt Lippman's hand easing the coverings from his head, and the tightness of their fastenings was relieved as the doctor drew them aside. They fell away, leaving the flesh cold to the air, and he sat quiet, stunned and puzzled while his eyelids fluttered helplessly in agonising darkness.

"Half an inch of blind, nurse," said Lippman quietly, and Regan heard the tiny whine of the motor, cut off instantly; his stomach knotted with the tension and threatened to deposit its

contents on the floor.

The darkness lifted slightly, and his heart leapt as the greyness returned, stronger than it had been before, shapes appeared that he could not identify, but there was light where previously there had been—nothing.
"It's better than it was," he said huskily.

"Good." He heard Lippman let out his breath in a long sigh of relief. "Good. Now give it a minute and we'll raise the blind a little more. Blink your eyes hard, move them around-that's it."

The light grew stronger yet, and the shapes clearer. The tension that he had so recently relaxed was knotting his muscles again as his newborn eyes relayed messages to his brainstrange, terrible messages of a sharp, grey world that swam more clearly into his vision as the seconds passed—a world that was too bright for the small amount of light that crept through the fractionally raised autoblind. It was a world of blackness that was too light—and that alone was a frightening contradiction of terms—the lines were too sharp, too harsh, almost stereoscopic in their intensity. He shut his eyes against a brilliance that should not be there, and laid his head back against the chair.

"It-it's grey," he stammered at last.

He saw and felt the bulky form of Lippman move nearer. "What?"

"Everything is grey." Regan opened his eyes fractionally and saw the looming white clothed figure bending over him, bald headed and grim faced.

"Let the blind up a little more," ordered Lippman, and on the edge of Regan's vision a grey figure moved and allowed the

blind to rise another inch.

He winced with pain, closing his eyes and turning his head away from the source of light as its brilliance lanced through him. There was light and life that he had never imagined before. The greys vanished in the firelight of coruscating colour that crept through the narrow slit of uncovered window. The whole room took on a fantastic sharpness such as he had never known in the days when his own eyes performed their duties.

"Shut it," rapped Lippman, and the brilliance vanished from Regan's tortured lids. "It is early yet," said the doctor. "You must remember that these are alien organs and will pass alien messages to your brain until you learn to adjust. The main thing is—can you see proper images?"

Regan nodded, speechless from an unnamed fear.

"Good. We will fit you with darkened contact lenses to make things easier during the period of readjustment. It will come slowly, but the important thing is that the Licharian surgeons were right—you can see."

"Yes." Regan chuckled coldly, and felt the sweat beading his forehead. "Yes, of course. They were right, and I can

see."

"We will let you rest now. If you want the blind raised again you can call for the nurse."

Regan heard the door close behind their departing figures, and he relaxed, preparing himself for another excursion into the grey, terrible world that he had seen bare minutes earlier. The room, he knew, should be in absolute darkness with the blinds in position, but the greyness through his lids told him that there was light for him to see by. He opened his eyes.

It was as bright as day, but there was no colour—only a thousand variations of black and grey so sharp that an artist might have cut them with a knife. Instinctively he knew that the room was in blackness to a normal human, but the odd combination of human nerves and alien organs had produced a hybrid that was frightening in its implications. There was horror in the prospect of full daylight, and he wondered what

the full light of the noonday sun might do to him.

Panic seeped through him, and he heard a slight whimper break from his trembling lips. He reached out to the table beside his chair, anxious to grip some concrete object that would help him retain his precarious hold on reality. The plastic coolness of its smooth top soothed him momentarily, and his alien, prosthetic fingers clutched it gratefully, savouring the solidity of a manmade object.

And then the panic returned.

The plastic crumpled like paper under his frantic grasp—there was a horrible crackling and breaking as his right hand gripped the half-inch thick sheet of plastic that was the table top, and reduced it to a mass of broken, shattered shards.

Regan lay trembling and sobbing under the impact of a new and terrible horror. Under the stress of his human emotions his alien muscles had, for the first time, revealed their full power. In a daze Regan sat in his chair in the darkened room and wondered just how human he now was.

four

The need to cover up the real cause of the broken table was almost automatic—it was a reaction that Regan recognised as being an integral part of his new personality. He explained to Lippman how he had blundered about in the darkened room, knocking the table over so that one corner of it splintered against the floor.

"Probably a weakness in the material," was his nonchalant

dismissal of Lippman's mild surprise.

The darkened contact lenses came to make his life more bearable, and with their help Regan found that he had a great deal more control over his sight than he had before. He could regulate and balance the amount of light his eyes received almost as if he was turning off a mental light switch. In almost complete darkness he could read a book without strain, and in blinding sunshine he could reduce the influx of light rays to a bearable minimum. The contact lenses stayed to satisfy Lippman.

Under the new and strengthening life that was permitted him by the medical staff Regan began to emerge as a butterfly from its chrysalis. He took exercise in the gymnasium, and spent hours walking and running in the wide hospital grounds. His life became normal and his fears vanished as his strength increased. Only when he had to look in a mirror did his confidence evaporate. He could remember all too clearly his former physical state wherein his six foot frame had presented a pleasing exterior to the universe. His skin had been dark and his hair blonde, his body well muscled and his overall good looks enough to call forth interest from the opposite sex. And now.?

Gradually, he grew used to the white unnatural lines of his face wherein a newbuilt nose was too aquiline for the squareness of the jaw. The flesh was new and shiny and would never again grow a man's beard. The hairline was non-existent, and only a scrub of prematurely grey hair relieved the ugliness of an otherwise bald head. But it was the eyes that were the most terrible feature. They were large, half as big again as normal terran eyes, and they bulged in the sockets like the eyes of a madman, the great, violet irises flaming in a compelling gaze which was almost hypnotic in its intensity. Regan wondered just how much thanks the Licharians should have for his new sensitivity.

Fully clothed his body did not look abnormal, but stripped he was a mass of scarred and whitened skin that no amount of plastic surgery and skin grafting could eliminate; his legs and arms looked as nearly human as the alien eyes of a Licharian surgeon could create, but their falseness was all too clear, and Regan was forced to dress in clothes that hugged wrist and

ankle in a camouflaged embrace.

With returning mobility came restlessness. He had been an invalid and under medical care for almost two years, and he recognised the need for a return to normal life as soon as it was practicable. The need was recognised, too, by Lippman and the other doctors who were part of his world, and the situation built to a climax over a period of several weeks. Thus, Regan wasn't in the least surprised when Lippman joined him in the hospital grounds one morning, and announced, "We think that you are fit enough to leave here, Regan."

Oddly, Regan didn't feel excited. There was too much that was fresh in the passport of walking out into the world again.

The hospital had become his world almost as if he had known no other. Outside were people who would stare, places that would be strange, a future that was uncertain and even frightening.

"We have been making the necessary arrangements for some time," went on Lippman, seating himself in a chair beside Regan. "You have probably known for some weeks that you are fit and well-as fit and as well as we can make you. You can leave here and live a normal life again. You can walk, run, iump, see as well as you could before—" Regan laughed coldly to himself, "-in every respect that matters-save that of physical aspect. In fact, you are as well as you have ever been in your whole life before, surprising as that may seem."
"I'm fitter than I ever was," agreed Regan with a sour

chuckle. "Only I don't look so good."

"You have been a very lucky man," Lippman admonished

gently.

Regan nodded. "I know it. Forgive my cynicism, Lippman. I owe you a lot." He glanced quickly at the doctor. "When do I leave?"

"Within the hour."

"So soon?" Regan's hairless brows lifted in surprise. " But-"

"We felt that it would be best—for psychological reasons." Lippman rose from his seat. "I have already arranged for your belongings to be packed. If you will come along to my office I will introduce you to your escort back into the world of man."

They reached the main building and walked along the white. asceptic corridor to Lippman's office. The doctor opened the

door and ushered Regan inside.

From a chair in one corner of the room rose a slim, dark

man who smiled and bowed slightly as Regan entered.

"This is Mister Shay Doon," said Lippman. "He is an agent of the insurance company which has been handling your affairs since the-ah-accident. Mister Doon-this is Mister Regan."

Regan nodded and shook hands, careful, despite his bewilderment, not to break the man's hand with his grasp.

"I am pleased to meet you," said Doon, brightly. "You are our most famous customer, Mister Regan."

"Indeed?"

"Of course. You've been worth thousands to us in publicity. You know-' The Man Who Could Not Die '."

" What ?"

"Because he had an Inter-Galactic All-purpose Policy."

- "Oh, I see." Regan took an instant dislike to the bright young man with the too white teeth, and as he glanced at Lippman he had a shrewd suspicion that the doctor shared his view.
- "Mister Doon will act as your escort back to a normal life," said Lippman. "The Company offered his services, and it seemed to be a good idea that you should take advantage of their offer." He held out his hand to Regan. "I do not like long farewells, Regan, and in your case you have become something of an institution within my professional orbit—I shall miss you."

Regan took the proffered hand. "This is all so quick—"

"We think it is best."

"I bow to your judgment. Thank you-for my life."

"You should thank an unknown alien for that, Regan. I only finished what they began."

The sun was hot upon Regan's head as he walked across the wide expanse of lawn in front of the main hospital building. Beside him Doon chattered brightly and inconsequentially, his words making no impression on Regan's dazed mind. At last

he was going back into the living world.

And still he could not grasp the suddenness with which he was being wrenched from the confortable womb of existence that was symbolised by the white building behind him. He knew that two years of stillness and stagnation were gone—two years that had been taken from his life in order that his life might be saved. Now, ahead of him, lay the harsh reality of existence, and he had to steel himself against the strangeness that was to come.

"You're not listening to a word I say," said the complaining

voice of Doon beside him.

"Oh, yes. I'm sorry. I was thinking."
"I said, I suppose you're glad to get away from that place." Regan stopped in his tracks and turned to look back at the building from which they had come.

"On the contrary," he said, slowly, "I am extremely sorry to be leaving it, because I owe it my life—what is left of it."

"When you're ready," called Doon, "I have a copter waiting."

The hospital, he knew, was several miles out in the country from the main city of Carvill, and the copter covered the distance in a little over half an hour. Doon kept up a running commentary of chatter that made little impression on Regan as he looked eagerly down on the passing scene. He grunted appropriate replies from time to time, but the main stream of the man's patter passed unnoticed and unheeded over his head.

The one fact that did shock him, momentarily, was the size of the cheque that would be credited to his account by the

Insurance Company.

"How much?" he asked blankly.

Doon smiled smugly. "I thought that would surprise you. One hundred thousand credits, Mister Regan, enough to keep you in comfort for the rest of your life."

"Why?" demanded Regan flatly.

Doon blinked at him in surprise, and then flapped his hands in sudden aggravation. "Really, I think you might show a little more gratitude—"

"Why?" insisted Regan. "As I recall the policy was only worth fifty thousand—and I'd have to be dead to collect it."

"Well, as I said, we had a good deal of publicity out of your case, and when we knew that you were going to live—ah—that is—"

"All right, I get the idea," snapped Regan. "You're buying me off for all the free advertising you've had over the past two years. What about the rest of passengers on that ship? They were insured as well, weren't they?"

"And their dependents have been paid," retorted Doon stiffly. "Your attitude is quite incomprehensible, Regan—"

Regan grunted and lost interest in the whole affair as he turned to renew his study of the Ferroval scene.

Ahead of the copter the gleaming spires and buildings of Carvill loomed through the afternoon haze, shining in the brilliant sunlight. This was the sight he should have seen two years ago—if the Ferroval cruiser had completed its journey. It was a very different ending to the one that he wished had been written.

As they came in to a landing on the copter roof of a large building, Doon said, "We have arranged for you to have a suite in this hotel, the Waverley, Regan. All expenses paid for one month. In that time, no doubt, you will be able to decide what you wish to do."

Regan turned and looked at him balefully through his dark lenses. "What would you do, Mister Doon, if you had not seen your home world and your family for over two years? Would you sit around in some plush hotel suite deciding what

to do ?"

"Really-"

"Instead of splashing money around on this damned suite," Regan continued coldly, "you can re-allocate it to booking me a berth on the first ship out of here to Caledon—or at least in

that general direction."

Regan slid the copter door open and stepped through it down on to the roof top before Doon could object further. The insurance man followed him out, protesting bitterly in a sharp, petulant tone that Regan was being absurdly high handed. "After all we've done for you, Regan, the least you can do is to co-operate for a few days—"

"Which suite have you booked for me?" interrupted Regan.

" Number eighty seven—"
" Have you the key?"

" Of course, but-"

"Then let me have it. After that you can climb back in that copter and go back to your office or wherever you're supposed to go at this time of day."

Doon gaped at him in mingled horror and astonishment.

" Now, see here-"

"The key," snapped Regan.

Reluctantly, Doon reached into his jerkin pocket and brought forth an ornamental key ring with three bright, new electronic keys attached to it.

"But what shall I tell my chief?" he wailed as Regan took

them.

"Tell him what you damned well like. Tell him I want to be left alone. Tell him—what you please." Regan turned abruptly and headed across the roof towards the elevator.

five

For many weeks there had been a nagging something at the back of Regan's mind, something that he couldn't express in words or even crystalize into thoughts. He had thought perhaps that it was some mental after-effect of all that he had been through. He knew himself to be a tougher man than he had been before the explosion of the Ferroval cruiser, almost it seemed he had been through the fire and emerged tempered and strengthened. His new mental approach was a part of all this—or so he had assumed—but now he knew that he was wrong. He knew it because of the three men who sat quietly in that wide, luxurious room and waited for him to come to them.

Two of them were young, well dressed, with an air of elegance that was belied by an athletic bulkiness. The younger of the pair was blonde, white skinned and blue eyed—a terran; the second was older, probably in his late thirties, black skinned with tight black hair and a thin, quixotic moustache that was a

hundred years out of date.

All of this Regan took in at a glance, and immediately his attention turned to the third man—the only one of the three who really meant anything in the frozen tableau created by his entrance. He was old and grey, and his body had already begun to slump with the burden of his years, his face was dark and heavily lined, with a neat chin beard and moustache that was even more antediluvian than the moustache of his younger companion. His clothes were dark and unobtrusive, as if he wished to lose himself in a grey world that lacked any colour, but by their very sombreness they made his presence as conspicuous as if he had gone naked. He looked, thought Regan, as if he had stepped from a family portrait that was two hundred years old.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," Regan said quietly as he felt

an unfamiliar tingle chill his nerves.

The old man stirred slightly and looked at him from piercing,

heavily browed, grey eyes.

"That is an odd greeting for members of the family," he said in a thin, high voice. "I am sure your cousins are flattered to be called gentlemen, but I am too old for flattery—or for games."

Regan felt the tingle grow stronger; he felt as if he was in a play which had been rehearsed and rehearsed a dozen times

before. The reflex reply was automatic as he said, calmly, "I

think you have made some mistake."

"Come, Manuel. Enough of this foolishness," the thin voice was sharp with annoyance. "It is two years since we met —I had expected something better for your father after all that you have been through."

Regan sat down carefully in a chair and tried to steady himself. The old horror that he had known eighteen terran months ago on the planet Lichar was with him again. He opened his mouth to speak, but the words would not come; there was only one thought at the back of his mind—they had not believed him when he had denied the identity of Manuel Cabrera.

"You are to be complimented on your efforts to cover your identity," said the old man. "It was unfortunate that you were not entirely successful, but that was not your fault—six months was too long for the news to get around. I may say that we have had a good deal of difficulty in protecting your existence, but," he chuckled harshly, "we have managed."

Suddenly, everything fell into place for Regan, and there was

despair in the knowledge.

Dully, he said, "I wondered at all the odd people who kept

cropping up in my mail and on the tapes I received."

Again there was the harsh, rasping chuckle and the old man replied, "We thought that you would respond to such an approach. After all, we dare not visit you before, it would have been too dangerous, until we were sure of your complete recovery. Once that was assured we made ourselves ready to get you away from Ferroval with the utmost speed."

Regan started to laugh gently to himself, his shoulders shaking slowly in a rhythm that grew more violent as the threat

of hysteria grew stronger.

"Manuel, this is insufferable," snapped the old man. had thought that you would be strong enough to bear your tribulations with at least a semblance of the strength which you have inherited."

Regan controlled himself with a vast effort, but the hysteria still bubbled in his stomach and threatened to break forth again as he said, "My inheritance is clearly lacking something, Mister Cabrera. The plain truth of the matter is, as I have said before, that my name is Martin Regan—your son, Manuel, died in the explosion of the Ferroval cruiser."

The silence was broken only by the rustle of cloth as the

black skinned man rose slowly from his chair.

"I thought," said Regan desperately, "that I had made it clear—"

"It was Manuel's capsule that was picked up," snarled the

black man.

"Carlo, be silent." The old man leaned forward in his seat, his eyes slightly narrowed, and his face even greyer than it had been before. "We received some of your belongings—"

"Manuel's belongings," interrupted Regan.

"But—this cannot be! All these months of waiting." The voice was a thin whisper and the eyes slid away from Regan's face as their owner tried to assimilate his own thoughts. "The accident—your memory has been affected—"

"Did the doctors indicate that?" asked Regan gently.

- "No, no. Of course not. There must be an explanation." The grey eyes returned to Regan's face, harder than before, and with anger written plain in their depths. "If you are joking with us, Manuel—"
- "I told you," insisted Regan gently. "I am sorry for the error, but Manuel is dead. He was not in the cabin when the—the accident occurred. I was, and I dived into the nearest escape capsule—it was the one that Manuel should have occupied had he been there, and if I hadn't made it when I did then I would not be here talking to you now. Mister Cabrera, I am sorry, but I thought that it had all been cleared up—no one said that there would be any trouble. Look, even the insurance company know I am Martin Regan—"

"Of course they would say so," snapped the black man.

"Your father owns it."

The statement stopped Regan in his tracks, and it was moments before he could say, "He is not my father—I told

you."

"You are quite serious," the old man said. "Yes, I can read it in your face. No one would be so cruel as to prolong a jest to this unseemly length." One large tear slid down the pattern of creases that formed the right cheek, but that was all the sign he gave that eighteen months of believing had been shattered in less than five minutes; that the son he believed to be alive had been dead for two years.

"I am sorry," said Regan simply.

A silence stretched out into minutes as the old man sat quiet and still, alone with his grief—a grief that had come twice over the same lost son. The blonde youngster sat and watched Regan with bleak, blue eyes, and the dark-skinned man roamed

a restless vard or two at the back of the old man's chair.

Regan stirred at last and rose to his feet. The visit had been too prolonged for any good that it could now do, and he wanted to be alone with his thoughts to plan and to decide what he should do.

"I do not wish to appear rude, Mister Cabrera," he said, "but I am anxious to be alone. This is my first day of freedom for almost two years. I want to think and plan how I may get to my home world of Caledon. I, too, have friends and relatives_"

"Be quiet," said the blonde youngster coldly.

Regan gaped at him, shocked at the hostility of the words as much as by the fact that these were the first sounds uttered by the man since the odd, cryptic conversation had first begun.

"Softly, Armand, softly." The old man came alive again with a slow, quiet movement of one hand. "Senor Regan has as much right to his privacy as we have to our grief." The grey eves turned again on Regan, and they were as unemotional as they had been before the coming of their owner's grief. "There is only one problem now, and that problem belongs to Senor

Regan shrugged and grinned. "I have no problems—"
"Indeed you have," said the thin, high voice. "Se Regan, you may convince me, and others of the family, that you are not one of us, but there are others who might be more difficult to convince."

"I don't understand."

"Of course you don't. You don't understand the trouble we have gone to over the past months guarding and protecting you because we thought you were one of us. You do not know that five men have died in an attempt to capture your person and in efforts to protect it. You cannot know the amount of money that has been spent in trying to convince people that you are what, in truth, you are—that you are Martin Regan and not Manuel Cabrera." The old man leaned forward in his chair. "I doubt if you would believe me if I told you that, should you remain on this planet for more than a few hours, then you stand a very good chance of being killed or kidnapped —most probably the latter since the former will come later, when your kidnappers find that you are not Manuel Cabrera."

"You're mad-"

"If we walk out of that door, Senor Regan, and leave you as you would seem to wish, then I can guarantee that you will be dead in a very short while."

six

The words were spoken coldly, and with a complete lack of emotion. The old man showed plainly that the fate which might befall Regan did not particularly concern him. Regan was caught up in a web of intrigue through no fault of his own, but his presence in that web could not effect the ultimate unravelling of its fine meshed strands. Cabrera didn't care whether he lived or died.

Regan shivered despite his immediate conviction that what the old man had said was ridiculous; it had to be ridiculous, and he voiced the thought aloud with studied by unconvincing deprecation.

"Nonsense. Who would risk their own life just to kill me?"

"Not you, but my son, Manuel." The brilliant old eyes flickered, and a lined, brown hand waved at the dark figure of the black man. "Tell him our thoughts, Carlo."

Carlo smiled. "Regan, do you really think that the Ferroval

cruiser exploded accidently?"

Regan said nothing.

"It didn't—of that we are sure. It was destroyed at the one time when Manuel was not in his cabin, and it was arranged by someone who was well acquainted with Manuel's habits. This was his achilles heel, his desire to take a leisurely toilet every morning at eight o'clock. Oh, yes—" he waved away Regan's attempted interruption, "we know just when it happened. Someone else knew and made suitable arrangements—"

"But if you knew that this might happen—"

"We knew," snapped the blonde youngster. "Manuel laid a dozen false trails, and still they found him."

"He should not have used his own name," said Regan

grimly.

"Why not?" countered Carlo. "Would it not be a good piece of double bluff? Would anyone expect Manuel Cabrera to travel under his own name if he was trying to keep the fact a secret?

Regan shrugged. Much good the double bluff had done to the dead, blasted person of Manuel Cabrera. "Who are 'They'?" he asked suddenly.

"It does not concern you-"

"It does if 'they' are going to kill me," retorted Regan.

Carlo ignored the comment. "I have established the scene for you, Regan. Manuel Cabrera had to die, and sixty-eight others died with him—that is the measure of his importance. Later, he was alive again through some trick of mistaken identity because someone made an error in checking. An attempt was made to correct that error, but the end result of it all was merely to convince us-and others-that you were. in fact, Manuel Cabrera-"

"But I'm not," insisted Regan.

"Can you prove it?" " Of course I can."

"How?" sneered Carlo. "Without finger prints or retina patterns? With no birth marks left on your body after the burning and the grafting? Even your bodily measurements will be different from those that you possessed before the accident." He shook his head. "You have only convinced us of your true indentity because Manuel would have no reason to hide from us. But he would have reason to hide from others-and their reactions would be very different."

"If all that you say is true," he looked across at the old

man, "what do you suggest that I do?"

The blonde youngster laughed harshly. "If you are killed then at least we shall have one less worry on our hands, Regan.

If you live-"

"Gently, Armand," broke in old Cabrera. "This thing needs to be thought on. It has come too quickly for us to consider all the implications in proper detail. Carlo, how long shall we be safe here?"

"I think for another four hours. Our security should be

tight for at least that period of time."

"And by then we shall be off planet." The old man nodded.

"But if we leave him," began Armand.

"They will know for certain that he is not Manuel. You are a fool, Armand." Cabrera sat straighter in his chair. "And in that fact lies the answer to our immediate dilemma. Mister Regan, I think that you had better come with us, for if you do that then there will still be doubt in the minds of those who wish to make sure of my dear son's death, and in that fact may lie something to our advantage."

"Why should I help you?" snapped Regan.
Carlo chuckled in the background. "If we leave you alone here you will very soon find out why."

Regan slumped a little in his chair, and ran a hand through the grey scrub of his hair. There was a tremor of very real fear within him, and the certain knowledge that he was unwittingly concerned in something that could mean life or death to him—and that was a choice from which he had escaped too recently for the memory of the struggle not to be deeply written on his mind. If there was any question of what he should do, then that recent experience decided him which road he should take.

"All right. I will come with you. But where does it end for me?"

Cabrera laughed gently and grimly. "If we could know what lies ten minutes in the future, Senor Regan, we should all be wiser and richer men than we are at present—we might even escape death itself, and that is a goal greatly to be desired by all men. Do you not agree?"

That final shaft went home, and Regan pursed his lips in dumb acceptance of his position. It meant that if he went with

Cabrera then he would live—if he did not—!

"Call in the copter, Carlo," ordered Cabrera. "Let us leave."

The dark man took a tiny communicator set from an inner pocket and whispered a rapid code sentence into it that was lost to Regan's ears. Cabrera rose unsteadily to his feet and took the arm of Armand for support. Carlo motioned Regan to follow the slow moving couple, and brought up the rear himself as the group left the apartment which had been home

to Regan for just thirty minutes.

In the corridor at strategic corners were men whom Regan had not seen before; they guarded the approaches to the apartment and the stairway to the copter roof with eagle eyes and a vigilance that was disturbing in its thoroughness. Regan knew what Carlo had meant when he said that security was tight, and he wondered dazedly what sort of resources these men had at their disposal. The old man owned the insurance company that employed Doon, so Carlo had said, and there had been guards to watch over him all the long time he was convalescing. There were more guards here, and on the roof a giant copter with more men to fly it and to guard its occupants. Cabrera was a big man in his own circle, and all the signs gave that circle a vast circumference.

The roof fell away below them as the copter lifted into the air, and the machine swung southward, heading out in the opposite direction from that by which Regan and Doon had approached the city. Beside him and to the rear sat the old man and his two companions; they were relaxed, chatting among themselves in soft monotones which Regan couldn't overhear. Ahead, between his seat and that of the pilot sat four men of the same type who guarded the hotel, and Regan saw that their eyes were constantly in motion, scanning the sky around them while the hum and click of a detector unit was plainly audible above the louder noise of the copter motor.

For almost an hour they headed south, out into the open lands, away from the city. After initial tension Regan relaxed and even managed to doze a little, lulled by the all pervading hum around him. He nestled in a cocoon of sound that numbed his mind into sleep—a sleep that wasn't broken as the motor cut out leaving him in an oasis of silence. The silence was broken by the burst of angry voices raised around him, and he awoke with a start to hear the pilot shout, "The engines are dead, sir. There is no power."

The powerful figure of Carlo pushed past his seat, and Regan sat bolt upright, his body taut with the sudden panic around him that was transmitted to his own being.

"Switch to emergency," called Carlo.

"The power unit is dead—"
Dammit, man, it can't be."

Carlo turned towards them, his black eyes brilliant with rage. "We shall have to land—"

"Can't we make the ship?" called Armand.
"No, it is nearly thirty minutes away."
"But if we land we shall be at their mercy."

Already the copter had slipped into a shallow dive that would bring it ultimately to the ground, and although Regan knew that there was little danger of a disastrous crash if the pilot knew what he was about, he had little doubt but that the incident was not an accidental one. The reactions around him confirmed his opinion.

"We shall have to land," came the piping voice of the old man. His tone was clear and cold, and he alone seemed to have retained his calmness; for that alone Regan admired him. "Carlo, we must take our chances on the ground. If we do not arrive within the hour there will be forces from the ship to look for us."

"But they will have no time," said Carlo. "This has taken

place at a pre-arranged spot, that much is sure."

"Then you will have to make time," snapped Regan suddenly, and he saw the old face swivel to look at him approvingly.

"Regan is right," said the old man. "Swing the copter

away to the west. What is our height?"

"Three thousand."

"Then we should make at least five miles. Head for the broken land away towards those hills. There are no roads and no surface transportation there. They will have to come for us in the air, and it will be night in another hour."

"We may crash if the ground is not level," warned Carlo

grimly.

"We must take that risk. What we need is time-"

"You are an old man," protested Armand. "If we crash-"

"Remember your position," snapped the thin voice. "Armand, my word still rules, and you do ill to remind me of

my years."

"I am sorry." Even in the stress of the moment the old man's personality still quelled, still ruled, and Regan had to wonder at the iron grip he still exerted despite the rigours of emergency.

The copter banked away to the west, and the wind whistled eerily around the hull. The men fell silent and all eyes were fixed on the low hills ahead of the copter while the pilot wrestled with the controls and fought to retain height for as long as possible.

"If we can clear them," breathed Armand at Regan's back.

"No, they are too far off," said Carlo. "We shall hit the lower slopes."

"Do you see any trees or woods?" called the old man.

"Not yet-we are too far off-"

"I do," said Regan abruptly. "Away to the left—a large forest area."

"Good. Can you see it, Carlo?"

"Yes, I've got it. About four miles. Pilot, can we make it?"

"I will try but I think we shall be short."

"If we can get to cover," said Cabrera, "then they will have to flush us out, and if it takes them too long then our own parties from the ship will be out looking for us." The pilot's judgment was correct, that much was clear as the copter moved towards the dark forest area, losing height as it did so. They were still a mile short of cover when they hit the ground—a smooth landing in an area of scrub land that did not have any hidden ditches. The port landing gear broke under the shock of impact, but the main body of the craft was undamaged.

They climbed out through the main hatch and dropped to

knee deep grass and scrub.

"Too short, too short," muttered Carlo angrily. "We shan't make it in less than twenty minutes through this country—they will have copters on to us by then."

"We'll make it quicker if I carry you, Cabrera," said Regan,

and there was a shocked silence from the other men.

"You are insolent," snapped Armand. "And you are a fool—"

"He is right," said the high whisper of the old man. "We must hurry and I shall hold you back. Therefore, I must be carried."

"Then I will do it," retorted Armand.

Regan flexed his prosthetic muscles, and exulted for the first time in the knowledge that in this, at least, he was superior to other men. He said nothing, but reached down and gathered the thin body of the old man into his arms. He headed across the scrub land towards the shelter of the trees, and the others followed, Armand and Carlo close by, the pilot and the other four men bringing up the rear. They moved at a half trot, stumbling often on the uneven ground while their ears were ever alert for the telltale hum that would tell them that they were too late—that they would never reach the shelter of the trees that pointed beckoning fingers to a sky already darkening as dusk swept over the low hills.

"It will be quite black in little more than half an hour."

panted Carlo. "We shall be safe then."

Regan's heart was thumping and his lungs strained to pump more air into his straining body, but his arms and legs moved rapidly, untiring and effortless in their task of supporting the frail body and carrying the joint burden towards the forest. Even with his burden Regan outpaced the others, and he could hear them toiling yards behind him as he broke through the first trees and moved deeper into the protecting darkness. He paused and set the old man down. The rest came panting up to join them, and Carlo dropped on his back on to a grass covered mound.

"Just in time," he muttered, panting with the effort of his exertions. "I heard the sounds of a copter a moment ago."

"Then we must move deeper," said Cabrera. "They will not see us through the trees."

"But they will have the copter to guide them." said Regan

coldly. "They will guess where we are headed."

He reached down and lifted the old man from the ground. There was a sense of power in being able to do it, a feeling of superiority over Carlo and Armand—even over the old man, for without Regan's strong arms they could have been caught in the open, naked to the view of their pursuers—and Regan had a good idea that they knew it.

They moved more slowly now, threading their way through trees that grew more thickly as they walked, through undergrowth that made walking more difficult. Over the tree tops the hum and buzz of more than one copter reached them clearly, but here, with the forest silence around them, they seemed to be aloof and cut off from the world beyond. Regan still headed the group, the old man a feather weight in his arms, and the shadows deepened around them as the dusk came down. To Regan the dusk was no obstacle, and he knew that he had a great advantage over the others when Carlo called, "Regan we must stop. We can't go blundering around in this darkness any longer."

"All right." Regan halted and laid the old man down. He waited for the others to struggle up to him, and as they did so he could see how greatly the struggle through the trees had affected them. They were all dirty and dishevelled, their

clothes torn and stained by the trees and foliage.

"What do we do now?" asked Armand.

"We wait," snapped Regan. "They must come to us—"
"Your opinion is of no value," broke in Armand angrily.
"You are here by virtue of Senor Cabrera's patronage—"

"Oh, no. I'm here because you dare not leave me behind," Regan interrupted sharply. "Cabrera, you were right when you said that they would know I was not Manuel Cabrera if you left me behind. I have had time to think about it recently, and I have reached a very interesting conclusion."

"And what is that?" asked the old man, softly.

"For some reason you have to keep Manuel Cabrera alive. For that reason alone you dare not leave me-you had to take me with you because you could do nothing else."

There was a dead silence.

"What would have happened, Cabrera, if I had decided to stay?"

The only reply was a dry chuckle from the thin, grey lips.

seven

The copter noises had long since faded, and only the night sounds of the forest vied with the heavy breathing of the exhausted men around him. Regan felt the frustration of his position breed irritation within him, but he knew there was nothing he could do. If he had refused to accompany Cabrera voluntarily then he would have been removed by force. The old man's reactions to his questions had been answer enough that needed no spoken word to elaborate his meaning.

"The ship parties should be looking for us now," said Carlo.
"They will be too late," said the old man. "Which way is

the wind blowing."

"The wind?" Regan felt Carlo stir uneasily beside him.

"There will be stun gas through these trees or I miss my guess."

"If they are so prepared," put in Armand.
"Of course they will be prepared. Armand you are a fool. We have managed temporarily to avoid them, but if they are sufficiently determined they will take us-and that soon."

Silence followed the old man's pronouncement, and the uneasy murmuring of two of the other men reached Regan's ears.

"I was ill advised to make this journey," remarked Cabrera,

almost to himself. "It has rendered me vulnerable-"

"You did not know that I was not Manuel," broke in Regan, rising to his feet. "Any father would have rendered himself vulnerable to aid his son."

"You credit me with more love than I possess."

"Cabrera, I'm going back along the track to try and stop them. Tell one of your men to give me a gun-preferably a needle weapon which is silent." Regan had taken the decision quickly and coldly, as the only logical thing to be done. The others might be forced to sit around by their physical limitations, but he could see and move with a facility that was denied to them, and he knew that his one chance lay in the advantages of sight and surprise that he would have over his pursuers.

"You're mad," snapped Armand.

"No, just careful. I'm not going to sit around and wait for them to pick me up in an unconscious heap, Armand. If they do that, and if Cabrera is right, then I'll be dead before long." He shook his head, a movement unseen by the others in the blackness. "I'll take a chance—with Cabrera's permission."

There was a long pause, and then Carlo said, slowly, "Here, take mine, Regan. It is a needle gun—it will not betray you. It is lethal at five hundred metres, and it has two hundred missiles."

Regan took the proffered weapon and weighed it in his hand. It was small, light, and it fitted neatly into his palm.

"Why you?" Cabrera's voice was soft.

"Why not?" countered Regan. "I believe you when you say that I shall die once it is found that I am not Manuel—the events of the last hour have been enough to convince me. I shall be fighting for myself as much as for you, and I have seen too much of death these past two years to sit and wait for it again. Besides," he chuckled, "I have a slight advantage over the rest of you."

He turned and headed away, back along the route which they had so recently taken. A hundred yards away he paused and slid the dark contact lenses from his eyes. The light brightened around him, and his vision was clear for almost fifty yards through the dark shapes of the trees—the whole area was as

clear around him as if it was midday.

He left the track and circled around the path they had trodden, heading back along the forest trails towards the point at which they had entered the woods. He was still better than a hundred yards from the forest edge when the first blundering sounds reached his ears, and he dropped for cover behind a fallen tree, his probing eyes seeking movement ahead of him. When they came into sight it was with the careful progression of men who were wearing night glasses of limited range. They were men unsure of their position, who expected trouble to blast them from the trees at any moment. Regan judged that he had at least a thirty yard advantage of sight over the pursuers, and he was at least five hundred from the hidden group that he had left so recently. There was a little wind, but the direction was indeterminate, and if he judged the position rightly the group would advance until they met some form of opposition, and let the stun gas go in that direction—always assuming that Cabrera was right in his assessment of the situation.

For all the old man's great age Regan trusted his judgment.

The first men were in clear sight now, dark figures among the trees yet clearly visible to Regan's alien eyes. From the position of their limbs they were well armed, carrying their weapons ready for instant use. Regan settled into a comfortable position with the tree trunk as his shelter and arm rest. The advancing men were approaching at an oblique angle, spread out in a line that would not encompass his hiding place providing it didn't swing towards him once he started to attack them. He drew a bead with the auto sight on the man nearest to him, and pressed the button unemotionally.

The figure crumpled noiselessly to the ground.

He turned his attention to the next in line, and so clear was the sight that it was like target shooting back home on Caledon. Four men he took without so much as a sound from any of them, but the fifth was off centre, and the man fell screaming as the needle missile hit some painful but not fatal spot. Regan cursed to himself as the other targets sank instantly from sight behind the nearest cover. He considered his position but decided that it wasn't necessary to move since they could have no idea from which direction the attack had come.

He waited coldly and silently for them to make the next move, and across the intervening distance he could hear muffled, half shouted commands whose words, as individuals, were lost in the distance. The silence came and lasted and stretched into nerve tingling minutes; his eyes almost ached with the concentration of their probing, and Regan had consciously to relax his vigilance to prevent the strain from tensing his muscles into

knots of irritation.

When it came at last, the movement didn't escape him. From behind a tree a figure moved almost fifty yards away. It moved slowly and warily, lost for seconds behind the trunks of intervening trees and the bulk of low clumps of vegetation. Another man broke cover bare seconds later, nearer to him, but moving with the same silent watchfulness, taking advantage of every piece of cover. Regan waited, the gun ready in his hand, until the farthest figure crossed a slight break in the trees. This was the target he wanted for if he took the man farthest from him then it might throw the others off his position, and he judged that the nearer figure was still too far off to see him even with the night glasses that he was obviously wearing. He pressed the button and the man stumbled to fall silently in his tracks.

Even as he knew his shot was a success, Regan realised that he had made an error. The man nearer to him turned instantly and flung himself to cover before Regan could draw a bead on him. Somehow, he knew the direction from which the attack had been made, and now Regan's position was in danger.

A muffled thud, bare yards away, frightened him into dropping behind the cover of the tree trunk, and the screaming roar of an explosion blasted his ears and shook the ground around him. As the silence settled again the white hot glare of a flare light made the scene as bright as day, and Regan knew that his advantage of sight was, for the moment, taken from him. He scrambled away, keeping the tree trunk between him and the attackers as his prosthetic arms and legs carried his body, crabwise, and at tremendous speed, away from the immediate area of danger.

He turned off the straight route of his path and slid sideways in the same ungainly motion back, and to the rear of the attacking line. Another blast shook the atmosphere, and another flare lit the scene, but they were far enough away not to be dangerous. Silence returned to the forest again as the attackers realised that they had lost their quarry, and Regan sank, breathing hard, behind a large clump of brush.

Now, with time to think, he could see how near disaster had come to him. The two men—sent out far apart—had been decoys with some form of detection equipment that had picked up the single, silent shot from his gun. That had to be the answer for there was no other way in which the second man could have reacted with such vicious speed unless some technical agency had given him knowledge of Regan's position.

Slowly, the thumping of his heart quieted down, his breathing became normal; before him in the forest was quiet again, nothing moved or spoke, and even the night sounds of the wood were silent, as if waiting for the next move in the murderous game that was being played out between the tall, straight spires of the trees.

Regan licked his lips and realised that his time sense had entirely deserted him under the stress of his existence. He had no idea whether thirty seconds or thirty minutes had elapsed since he fired the first fatal shot.

If Cabrera was right there should be search groups out by now looking for them, and the sound of the explosion and the light of the flares would surely have guided them to the spot. Even as the thought came to him his ears picked up the sound of a copter somewhere high and far off, the noise carried on the night silence. It grew and swelled, was joined by another, and then both of them faded. The seconds grew into minutes, and far off came the sound of an explosion. The murderous chatter of an automatic weapon followed and the sounds built up to a cacophony that was drawing nearer and nearer to his position.

From the trees to the right a man broke cover passing into full view, another followed, and then another. Men ran, stumbling through the undergrowth, but it was the movement of flight not of pursuit, and Regan knew that Cabrera's men could not be far behind. He switched the needle gun to autofire and pumped silent death towards the running figures. Two of them fell and lay still, the third fell and writhed, crawling desperately for the shelter of a small bush. In his excitement Regan rose from cover, pumping fire towards the crippled target until it lay still. So intense was his concentration that he almost missed the two men who broke cover barely twenty yards away from him; he turned, firing as he did so, and watched with fascinated horror as one of them drew back his right arm and threw a small, round object towards his now open position. Desperately, he threw himself to the right, diving behind a tree, and the last thing he heard was the deadly thump as the grenade hit the ground bare yards from where he lay.

Too many times, thought Regan, have I awakened like this. It was like returning from a grave—every inch of his being concentrated on dragging himself back from some black pit of non-existence that sought to hold him in its grasp.

At first, there was the returning horror of the exploding ship, but his mind told him that the incident was past. The Licharians, the hospital, the blindness, the pain—all were remem-

bered and rejected until, at last, the slow, reeling picture of the

dark forest gyrated hazily through his mind.

His consciousness bore a frightening horror of blindness, and when he opened his eyes it was quickly, and with fear in the instinctive movement. Light dazzled him, so bright that it struck with the force of almost physical pain, and he shut them again quickly but with a mind that leaped with thankfulness.

Close at hand he heard a movement, and the soft, old voice

of Cabrera said, " Are you awake, Regan ?"

"Yes." He opened his eyes again, more slowly, allowing them to adjust so that the light was soft and normal. "Yes. I am awake."

He looked around, taking in the sybaritic surroundings of the room in which he lay. All around were soft furnishings of exquisite splendour, soft colours, luxurious ornamentation. every line and every curve bespoke a luxury that he had only read about, of wealth beyond the dreams of ordinary men.

"Where am I?" he asked.

"Aboard the ship for which we were originally headed," Cabrera sat a little away from him in the vast comfort of an easy chair.

Regan looked around and marvelled. "A ship?" he queried. "A ship—like this?" He swung his feet from the divan on which he was lying, and though his head reeled a little with the movement it was not enough to disturb the wonder in his mind.

Cabrera chuckled. "One of the advantages of my wealth,

Regan. How do you feel?"

"Well enough. What happened?"

"You were caught by an explosion. We found you after the fight was over and the battle won. My physician assures me that you are unharmed—a little concussed perhaps, but that is all." The old eyes regarded him sombrely. "We found the bodies of seven men dead of needle missiles."

"So? It should have been nine had I not been careless."

Cabrera was silent for a minute. "I think we might have found things difficult but for your efforts, Regan. Why did you do it?"

"I told you—self preservation. I have seen too much of death to wish to die without a fight."

"You have spread too much death today to be frightened by it. You fascinate me, Regan. Two years ago you were just another poor man with a good job, content to live his life in obscurity. I would guess that violence frightened you, that you were a timid man, a man of peace who abided by the law and went in fear of flamboyance."

Regan stared at him.

"And now you have emerged as a man without emotion, a killer with an overwhelming desire to survive yourself whatever the cost."

"Isn't that the desire of all men?"

"No. It is a desire forced upon them by circumstance. No man becomes ruthless unless he has to." Cabrera laughed. "I know that of my own experience, Regan. I think that once, many years ago, I was like you, and I changed even as you have changed through a desire to survive in a world that fights your survival. A man who is not important has nothing to fear, and with that lack of fear he seeks the dark corners, the quiet alleys of existence where no one notices him because he is merely one of a crowd.

"Sometimes—with perhaps one man in a thousand—he is forced from his comfortable nook, he becomes important because of some factor of wealth or knowledge or position. And once he becomes important he finds it necessary to fight for his survival because his importance is a matter of relativity. He is important alive, but he could be just as important when he is dead." The dark, old eyes bored into Regan's with the implacability and coldness of deep space.

Regan shivered a trifle as he realised that Cabrera's words had mirrored his own unspoken thoughts. The old man had laid bare his weakness with a frightening efficiency; whatever illusions he may have harboured were gone now, for ever. He looked around again at the luxury of the cabin in which he sat, and he knew what Cabrera meant. For a man to own all this—to be as powerful as Cabrera—!

"Who are you, Cabrera?" he demanded. "What are you,

that you can command my life in this manner?"

The old man smiled and shook his head. "I live as God has ordained that I live—and I shall die when he decides that my usefulness is over. I command no one, Regan, destiny shapes its heroes and its villains, and a man can only act as his conscience dictates. Does it surprise you that I should believe in God?"

"A man's beliefs are his own."

"No." The old man shook his head vehemently. "A man's beliefs can shape the Universe—they are not his own. That is the error of fools, of men who cannot see beyond their own limited horizon. That is why you are alive and my son is dead—destiny picked you to step into the arena, and God has decided Manuel's time had come. These are the factors which command your life and mine; what we do is forced upon us, and the actions we perform may affect the Universe forever from this day forward."

Cabrera rose slowly to his feet, a bent and ancient figure, his hands clasping an old, blackened stick to support his frail form.

"Rest now, Regan. We have talked enough. It is enough for you to know that we are headed for Earth."

" But-"

"I know. Caledon is your home, but I fear you would not live to see it under present circumstances." Cabrera paused at the cabin door. "Earth is your destiny, Regan. Caledon and peace are your goal—remember that, and you may live to be as old as I."

eight

So, after more than two years, Regan came back to Earth.

The week long trip in Cabrera's fast, luxurious ship, was a revelation to him. He had long since realised that the old man was wealthy and powerful, but even these ideas had to be drastically revised as the journey progressed. Regan learned a great deal.

The ship was of the latest design, a large, fast, heavily armed vessel, with a highly paid, expert, and well disciplined crew who obeyed Cabrera's every whim and command as if he were God. The old man's quarters were large and beautifully appointed, as were those of his companions, but the rest of the ship was austere and cold, built as a fighting unit of the highest calibre.

On the last day out from Earth they dined as usual, but the old man was pre-occupied. He ate quietly—still with enjoyment—and the others fell in with his mood. The brandy came at last, and the cigars, and as they were lighted, Cabrera said, "Have you thought about your stay on Earth, Regan?"

Regan rolled the large glass between his hands, studying the amber liquid, and swirling it so that it glittered in the light from the chandelier. He found it hard to believe that he was in a spaceship, sweeping at superlight speeds through the deeps of

"No," he said after a moment of thought. "No, I was

leaving it all to you, Cabrera."

" Are you not curious?"

"Curiosity benefits no one." Regan sipped the brandy. "No, I am not curious. I've decided that, in some way which you have not revealed, I may be useful to you. I know, too, that you can be useful to me—you will keep me alive. It seems a fair bargain."

Cabrera chuckled drily. "You are becoming more of a philosopher as time passes." He sucked a red glow to the tip of the cigar, and then blew the smoke up into the air so that it billowed around the chandelier. "Tell me, Regan, what are

you thinking?"

Regan looked down the length of the table at the dark, old eyes in the brown, wrinkled face. What was he thinking? He had tried to picture Manuel Cabrera in these surroundings, and he could not do it. The man who had shared his cabin for those brief days so many months ago, was as out of place as a black spade in a hand of diamonds. He had played the part of an amiable, rich dilettante—the sort of man whose death would not bring tears to the eyes of the old man seated opposite him; a smile of regret, perhaps, but tears—no. And yet of the three -Armand, Carlo and Manuel, it was the dead man who had been closest to the remote, austere terran.

"I think," he said slowly, "that your son was killed in an

attempt to destroy you."

The calm atmosphere of the dinner table was gone in an instant. Carlo sat straight up in his chair, his eyes coldly upon Regan. Armand muttered under his breath, his lips a thin line

of anger. Only Cabrera seemed unmoved.
"I think, too," went on Regan, "that while it is thought that Manuel Cabrera is alive, then your position is safe—though I have not yet been able to decide what that position is. You are a powerful man, Cabrera, but your power is not known to little people like me. I could have lived and died without ever knowing of your existence, if I had not had the ill fortune to share a cabin with your son-"

"You speak too much," threatened Armand, half rising

from his seat.

"Be still," said the old man. "A few days ago, Regan, you were a babe in a new world who wanted only to flee to the mother bosom of your own planet, there to hide yourself. Now, barely seven days later, you are a killer of men whom you have never seen, you have developed a fatalistic philosophy which, I suspect, you never had before, and—most important of all—you have started to think."

Regan shook his head decisively. "No, I am doing only one thing, Cabrera, the one thing that I learned to do well in the

past two years-I am surviving."

"Then you have solved the secret of the ages," Cabrera told him, his old eyes twinkling slightly. "Personal survival, Regan, is important only to the individual whom it directly concerns. It is the survival of the race which must be the goal of the masses."

"Your status belies that, Cabrera."

"No. My status is the symbol which shows what importance I attach to the survival of mankind. Were it otherwise I might have taken myself off to some remote backwater and stagnated till death claimed me."

"Maybe, for you, survival and stagnation are incompatible."

"You question us too much," snapped Armand, angrily.
"You live by our patronage, Regan, and you would do well to remember it."

"And you," replied Regan equably, "would do well to remember that I am as important to you as you are to me. Possibly," he smiled coldly at the younger man, "possibly, I am even more important to you than you are to me."

"That can easily be tested." Armand's voice was brittle

with dislike.

"Enough," said the old man. "Tomorrow we reach Xanadu. Time enough, then, to worry about the future."

For Regan sleep did not come easily that night. He recalled the questions raised by Cabrera's comments, the speculation that was born by the single sentence, "Tomorrow we reach Xanadu." And he remembered from his youth the half forgotten words of an old poem, words that did not come easily to his mind.

'In Xanadu did Kubla Khan

A stately pleasure dome decree . . .'

The name drew his attention and held his thoughts, though he would not have asked Cabrera where or what it was. A part of his new personality was the complete disavowal of the naivety which had previously marked him as a nonentity. Cabrera had noticed his freshened outlook, and Regan, himself, was conscious of a new force to his whole being. The newness of his body was matched by the newness of his mind, and each of them had a toughness that had been lacking in his former life.

If the name 'Xanadu' brought enquiry to his mind, then the wonder of Xanadu itself when first he saw it was a bright flame that he carried in his mind all the rest of his life.

Next morning, as the ship swung in orbit round the Earth, they took a smaller vessel down through the atmosphere, through the filmy curtain of clouds and into the daylight

portion of the planet.

They plunged out of a jet black sky into the blue globe of the world as it lay beneath them, and the blackness of space gave way to the brilliant sky and sun of Earth. From his seat in the small, comfortable cabin, Regan looked down on the spreading panorama of the city world that Earth had become over the centuries. The vast masses of the continents and the silver blue of the seas were all that had not changed in ten thousand years. Save for minor details they were as they had been for myriads of terran years. But now, the vast, spreading surge of population had enveloped the whole land masses in an all embracing coverlet of brick and steel and concrete and plastic. Only here and there did the high peaks of the Andes, the Himalayas, the Alps and the Caucasus mountains raise their heads proudly above a world ravaged and plundered by the forty billions of her own creation. The exploding population had long since taken possession of the last of the open spaces, and only the illimitable reaches of the heavens offered relief for a planet that was bursting at the seams and sated by her own abundance.

Regan had always disliked Earth. Now he loathed it with an intensity that surprised even him. His previous visits he remembered without pleasure, for then he had been an outworlder, an alien almost, who came to Earth to trade, to make his money from the need of its race to buy from other planets. The economics of necessity had been a closed book to Regan; he had known only that terrans had to buy, and that he had what they needed. And terrans wanted things greedily, they

were brash and demanding, insulting in their treatment of outworlders—' colonials '—runaways from the hard, crowded

life that was Earth at its busy worst.

Regan had known, vaguely, that there was jealousy at the back of that attitude—jealousy of the open spaces that he could enjoy on Caledon, jealousy of new planets with new people and vast, unspoiled landscapes that they—the terrans—could see only by proxy.

In the past Regan had not enjoyed his visits; this one he

hated.

They came in low across the wide reaches of the Pacific ocean, and ahead of them the long coastline of the South American continent stretched to the north and south. The peaks of the Andes showed in the distance, white topped and cloud rimmed, with the sun picking them out clearly despite the distance.

In the seat opposite Regan sat Cabrera, his hands folded across the top of his walking cane, his head craning to see out of the view port ahead towards the approaching continent.

Abruptly, Regan leaned across. "What is Xanadu?" he

asked

Cabrera smiled but did not turn his head. "It is home," he answered simply.

Regan thought of Caledon and said no more.

Below the speeding ship the coastline passed and with it the sea. They were low enough now to make out the sea-farms of the coast, with their jutting breakwaters, and the dull, dark coloured patchwork quilt of the cultivated areas. Over the coast the city state rose in all its artificial splendour; the high, skyscraper buildings reaching their fingers to the sky through the spindly, fairy webbed lacework of the high roads and the freight lines. The gleaming white areas of copter landing fields showed as chess board squares high in the caverns between the lifting spires, and below them, Regan knew, was only the oppression of too tall buildings that shut the sun from the lower city reaches, and that oppression was only relieved by an artificial daylight where night would otherwise rule.

The sun gleamed on the spires and windows, shafting up in glittering, diamond-like reflections that were gone in the fleetness of a micro-second as the vessel headed on over the city

towards the high peaks.

Regan felt anticipation, and saw it reflected in the attitude of the old man as the mountains loomed ahead. He sat more tensely in his seat, his old eyes searching the way ahead as if for some lost treasure that only he knew about. He bore the look of a man who had been away from home too long, and was now on the threshold. Regan envied him, and turned away to gaze in revulsion at the spawning horror of an over-populated world that was spread like some malignant growth over the land beneath.

The mountains loomed and broke before them. The maze of buildings petered out on the lower slopes and only the high, luxurious ambitions of the wealthy spoiled the higher slopes of their virginity. Here and there a small clutter of buildings revealed the place where some rich terran had attempted to lift himself above the level of his fellows and establish himself in

lonely seclusion on the slopes of the high peaks.

There came a break in the mountains, and the small ship headed for it, lifting in its flight path as the pilot headed for the pass between the peaks. The rock closed in around and on either side of them, snow covered, white and virginal, for here, alone of the world, was man unable to establish a foothold of any permanence. The valley floor lifted close beneath them, and then fell away. The rock faces were gone and ahead was only open sky with more peaks in the far distance. Before them

lay-" Xanadu," breathed Cabrera.

There was a wide valley with green grass and trees, the countryside was wild and open, and Regan saw, with eyes that refused to believe, herds of animals grazing on the grassy slopes of the lower hills. There was colour and life and light. Such colour as he had never seen in his whole life before—not even on his home world of Caledon, the world which they said was as much like Earth as made no matter. But this was different. On Caledon the grass was not so lush and green; on Caledon the sky was not so blue, nor the trees so tall. Beside this lush valley Caledon was dull and drear, a wild place with an alien taint that offended the eyes after this—this terran paradise.

"I never knew that there was such a place as this left on

Earth," breathed Regan.

The old man stirred and smiled across at him. "There are a few," he said, "perhaps fifty in the whole world, owned by men who have managed to survive against the encroachment of the

city state. I am one of the lucky ones, and this is my reason for surviving—this is what makes the struggle worth while." He looked away from Regan out of the viewport at the land over which the ship was skimming barely one hundred feet above the green surface. "In all the universe, Regan, there are few

places like this, and all of them are here, on Earth."

Regan looked down and marvelled. He had seen films and stereos of Earth as it had been once, long ago. There had been wide areas of virgin land, wild and open to the sun, vast herds of animals which grazed and fought and lived and died—until Man destroyed them. But in those artificial documentaries there had been one thing missing that no artificial process could ever have duplicated—reality! This was the reality of which history spoke. This was the reality which terrans had lost—most of them. This was the reality that all of them sought to regain. No wonder Cabrera had been moved to excitement at his return here, no wonder he had spoken the name of Xanadu with such reverence.

Regan looked down, and as he looked the ache for Caledon was gone and was replaced by a different ache. If this was

Earth, then this was where he belonged.

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The craft slid down to a landing in the shadow of the hills, and, from a small group of buildings away to one side of the landing area, men came to tend the ship and to supervise their disembarkation. Two ground cars were ready for them, and into one went Cabrera and Armand, while Regan and Carlo followed in the second.

The road was narrow and winding, quite out of character with the sleek bodies of the vehicles that slid noiselessly over the white, smooth surface. Their route led through thickly wooded slopes and along the sides of wide, grassy meadows, and they headed towards the central point of the large valley. Around them loomed the high peaks of the Southern Andes, their snow-covered slopes seeming to touch the sky above them.

Even Carlo seemed more relaxed here, and his eyes swept the scene around them as if he was seeing it for the first time.

They topped a small rise, and as they did so, Carlo said, quietly, "There is the house."

Regan looked down and across a secluded hollow, and there, about a mile away, and barely two hundred feet below them, lay the dark, squat bulk of an old, grey building. It was four stories high, shaped like an E, with the longest arm as the frontal facade from which the other, shorter arms jutted to the rear. Before it was a wide, green lawn, trimmed with the perfection that only centuries of care could produce, and spoilt only by the white curve of an approach road. The grey walls were green in places where the growth of lichen and ivy hid the grey stone, and on the corners vast, curved turrets gave the appearance of an ancient castle as their rounded breastworks softened the otherwise straight lines of the building.

Away from it, on all sides and at a respectable distance, were other buildings of more recent design, but the manner of their construction and the lie of the intervening land made it clear

that they could not be seen from the house.

The car with Cabrera in it, had stopped before them on the crest of the rise, and the old man climbed stiffly from his seat to stand at the roadside and look down on the scene before him. Regan and Carlo joined him as he stood there, one hand clutching his cane, the other resting in the crook of Armand's elbow.

"What do you think of it, Regan?" he asked, his high,

ancient voice trembling with pleasure.

Regan looked at it with his alien eyes, and allowed the beauty of it all to flow over him. "I have never seen anything like it in my whole life."

"Nor will you again," said Carlo from beside him. "I never knew a human who was not moved by his first sight of

Xanadu—nor an alien for that matter."

They got back into the cars, and continued down into the small valley.

The house was old as they got near to it, far older, thought Regan, than his first sight had admitted. The vast stone walls had the age of centuries upon them; they seemed as solid as the mountains that were in the background; as permanent as the bright sun high in the heavens. They smelt of age and history—and power.

If any one thing that he had seen told Regan of Cabrera's power it was this small, quiet valley, with its peace and content, its beauty and its solitude. Regan thought of the army of

people that were necessary to run it; he thought of the giant ship with its crew that had brought him to Earth; but above all he wondered at the power of Cabrera that he could command such a place as this on a planet where privacy and peace were the prerogative of but a tiny few.

The web of intrigue must be vast indeed if a person such as Cabrera could be persuaded to leave a place like Xanadu to

travel half across the Galaxy.

Regan looked on Xanadu and marvelled.

Once inside the vast entrance hall with its panelled splendour, Cabrera said, "I shall rest until later, Regan. This house is yours while you are here. Later, you shall meet the rest of the family." The dark, old eyes turned on him coldly, "And, Regan, while you are here your name will be Manuel Cabrera."

Regan eyed him blankly. The suddenness of the order had taken him completely by surprise. "What game are you

playing, Cabrera?" he demanded.

"Mine—and yours," replied the old man. "Only Armand, Carlo and myself know that you are not my son. For the moment I want it to remain that way. It is as much for your own protection as for my benefit."

"Why did you not tell me this before?"

"I dislike the use of force in any circumstances. It suited me better that you come to Xanadu willingly."

"I could break you in half with one hand," snarled Regan. "I doubt if you will," Cabrera said calmly. "Believe me, I

have your interests at heart."

"What of the ship's crew? They know already."

"No. If you will think back we were all very careful not to mention your name when there was the possibility of anyone being within earshot." The old man smiled. "You are still too naive, but that will pass. Rest now and this evening you will meet your other—relatives."

Regan knew that he had little choice in the matter.

He was shown to a room by a short, dark servant in a light, semi-formal uniform of blue, and he unpacked his few belongings before relaxing on the bed with the sun shining across the room to throw a shaft of brilliant light in which dust specks moved and shone. He dozed lightly for an hour or two, and when he awoke dusk was already darkening the sky outside the

window. He got up, showered and freshened himself, and dressed in a dark, well fitting suit that had been laid out for him by the dark-skinned servant. By now it was quite dark, and the lights of the house streamed out across the wide lawn. Regan looked at the darkened vista of landscape and wondered what he should do.

Cabrera wanted him on Earth—and wanted him there as Manuel Cabrera. Why? The ghost of a man two years dead had to be very important if his own father wished to continue the illusion of life.

He could see only two things.

First, Cabrera was in conflict with some group who wanted Manuel Cabrera dead.

Second, Manuel Cabrera was important because of something he knew or possessed. Possessed? Regan realised that it was hardly likely that Manuel had possessed anything, such was the manner of his death.

Even as the thought was born the third point flashed into his mind. He had been rescued by Manuel's capsule—therefore Manuel's belongings had been rescued with him, and that was doubly proved by the fact of the wrong identification. Therefore the situation was just the same as it had been two years ago when Manuel had left Earth on some mysterious mission which had ended with his murder.

And if that were so-!

A knock at the door interrupted Regan's reverie. He shook his head in disgust, realising that he could not take his line of thought any further without more information than he possessed at present. He crossed to the door and opened it.

Outside the dark figure of Carlo smiled at him sardonically.

"Can I come in?"

"Of course." Regan stood aside and closed the door as the black man entered. "What do you want?"

"There will be about twenty people at the table tonight,

Manuel-"

Regan glanced at him in surprise, but was rewarded only by

a saturnine smile.

"—most of them you will already know. Your mother, your sister, Giselle, and your cousins, Roberto, Pasquale, Simon, Anita and Consuela. There will be your uncle, Pedro, his wife, Pilar, and your widowed aunt, Felicia—your uncle Peyrol died six years ago—"

"I'll take it as it comes," interrupted Regan. "I'll not even

be able to remember the names."

"You'd better," snapped Carlo, "or you may be a dead man sooner than you expect." From a pocket in his black jerkin he drew forth a small packet of colour photos which he handed to Regan. "You have an hour before dinner to study them. I will call for you and escort you. And remember," he crossed to the door and paused with one hand on the handle, "the whole family has gathered to welcome you back, Manuel. Show your gratitude and your emotion by keeping as silent as is possible under the circumstances. No one will blame you."

He left the room and closed the door behind him, leaving Regan with more problems that he could well have done

without.

To be continued

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When Pike, a newspaper correspondent, uncovered a strange chain of events, the only solution was murder. For reasons which Pike found out later, the victim refused to die.

ECDYSIAC

by ROBERT PRESSLIE

Across the water, on the right bank of the Vistula, the lights of Praga were bright. The river itself had a glossy blackness that mirrored the distant lights with the sharpness and clarity peculiar to early winter. The heat haze of summer and the uncertain mists of autumn had given way to the crystalline transparency that frost and bitter coldness confer on the atmosphere.

Yet Richard Pike wore no topcoat. He was dressed in a black, nine-ounce lightweight suiting over an equally black shirt which was buttoned at the neck but unadorned by a necktie. He was shod in hand-made Italian black suede shoes. His movements were invisible and silent. He had his reasons

for wishing to be unseen and unheard.

He had been waiting by the side of the Vistula for an hour, since eight-fifteen. Most of the time he had stood motionless. His only movements had been a few cautious steps backwards and forwards, just sufficient exercise to keep the chill night air from stiffening his limbs.

He was desperately cold. But he had a reason also for

wishing to keep his body temperature low.

The reason lay in his right-hand jacket pocket. It was wrapped in an oil-soaked rag and the whole parcel was pro-

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tected by a polythene envelope. The gun was a vintage Parabellum from sometime around 1935. The silencer in his left pocket was more up-to-date. The ammunition was as fresh as the moment he had made it early that morning.

He had prepared his own ammunition more than once. He might have to do so many more times yet. For that reason it was essential that he had the necessary tools at hand yet not so

handy that prying eyes could find them.

Earlier that day, in the privacy of his hotel room, he had upturned his typewriter and unscrewed the various innocent looking bars and bolts which a non-professional would assume to be normal parts of the machine. With the deftness acquired of much practice he had pieced the parts together to form their real and more sinister entity. When the vice and clamp were rebuilt he had started work on the bullet that now nestled in the Parabellum.

In fifteen minutes of careful tooling he had removed the half ounce of lead from its casing. Replacing the lead with the wax imitation of exactly the same dimensions had taken much

longer.

The wax bullet had been prepared the previous day and kept in the coolest part of his hotel suite overnight. The bullet had been placed in a small jar of glycerine, the lid screwed tight and the jar lowered gently into the water in the cistern above the flush pan in his bathroom.

When fixing the wax bullet to the cartridge casing he had been forced to stop work several times while he surrounded the bullet and the tools with dry ice. It had been essential then, as it was essential now, that the wax must not be allowed to get

warm enough to start melting.

The bullet was a very special instrument of death. Inside the wax there was a core of metallic sodium. If the wax melted, the sodium would be exposed to the air and in spontaneous combustion with the water vapour and oxygen in the air it would burst into flame.

Richard Pike shivered as he waited but he had no immediate desire to seek warmth. Not yet.

He put a wrist close to his eyes, squinted at the luminous dial of his watch. Nine-fifteen, he read. Not much longer to wait. He thought it was fortunate that the bullet's target would appear near the bridge. Pike was in *Stare Miasto*, the 'old

city,' one of the three districts of Warsaw that were sited on the left bank of the Vistula. The fourth district was Praga on the other side of the water. Pike's victim should be leaving Praga soon, crossing the river by a small private motorboat to berth near the bridge where Pike stood vigilance. Which was fortunate, Pike thought. Anywhere else along the river bank there would have been no place to hide. The lee of the bridge's anchor arch answered his purpose perfectly.

In other times and different circumstances he would have relaxed sufficiently to marvel at the way the old city had been restored after the Luftwaffe's ruthless razing of Warsaw. There had in fact been moments when the beauty of the old city had intruded on his purposeful intent. Moments when he had been aware of the wonderful sgraffiti, the coloured scroll patterns and pictures which adorned most of the buildings. There had been moments when he had been able to behave like any other

visitor to Warsaw. But this was not one of them.

It was his hearing, not his sight, that gave him warning of his

victim's coming.

Overlaid on the quietness of the riverside there was a faint throb. He edged slightly into the open. Although he could not see the boat at first, he could see the phosphorescent spume of its wake.

He checked the time again. Nine-twenty. The boat was right on schedule. Weeks of patient observation of his victim's habits had paid off. Tonight, as on every Saturday night, he was crossing the river to spend the night with his woman.

Pike knew every detail of his victim's programme. His drive across the river. The taxi that would be waiting nearby to take him to his hotel in the centre of Warsaw. The elevator ride to the eighth floor. The quiet slip of a key into the lock on the door of Room 804. Pike could have killed him anywhere along the route. He had chosen the riverside for the seclusion it offered. Streets and hotels were too brightly lit. Someone might remember the man in black who had followed the victim to his hotel.

So it had to be here. This was the place. Now was the time. He took the Parabellum from his pocket, stripped off the polythene, unwound the oily rag, clipped on the silencer. The gun was freezingly cold to touch. For this he was glad. The wax bullet was still intact.

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Keeping back in the shadows of the bridge, he watched the boat edge close to the river bank, saw the man climb out. In seconds he would be mounting the short flight of steps to where Pike waited.

Even in the uncertain light he looked exactly as Pike remembered him. Pike could have described him with his eyes shut. Not very tall but quite wide and stocky. Overweight and slightly paunched so that he walked with a tendency to roll, sailor-style. Bald on top, fairish hair where it still persisted. Chubby fat face and wide fat lips like a pair of chipolatas.

He was up the steps and had passed in a pool of light splashed from the lamps on the bridge overhead. Pike hesitated for one second to make sure he had the right man in the sights of his

gun. One second was sufficient.

This was the victim.

This was the man he had killed three times already.

He was almost within arms' reach when Pike pulled the trigger, sure that he could not miss, sure that even the ecdysiac would not have time to escape in the split-second flight of the bullet.

At point blank range the wax bullet with its sodium core smashed into the victim's chest, gouging open a great hole as big as a man's head. Blood flooded out to douse the smouldering cloth of the victim's dress where the charge had fired it.

But before the broken corpse slumped to the ground,

Richard Pike was swearing silent bitter oaths.

The ecdysiac had escaped again.

Almost disinterestedly he looked at the body of the middleaged woman who lay where a man should have lain. She was completely dead. But Pike felt no revulsion. She had been dead for a long time, only her body had been kept alive or made to appear alive while its uninvited guest was hidden within.

Little dancing lights of flame were flickering in the tremendous bloody cavity of her chest where the naked sodium was feeding on the blood, converting its water content to hydrogen and oxygen and igniting the hydrogen by the heat of the

chemical reaction.

The lights were just bright enough to be conspicuous, unusual enough to attract the attention of anyone in the vicinity. Pike thought of the taxi driver who must be waiting near. He decided it was time he left, before he was spotted. He wiped the gun quickly, yet thoroughly, with the oily rag and pitched it far out into the Vistula.

He was shivering violently now. The period of tension was over and he was more conscious of the cold. Reaction and disappointment also contributed to his shivers. He turned up his jacket collar and headed rapidly for the side street behind the railway lines where he had left his car.

It was the same as it had been after the other killings. Always he felt the same needs. The need for a drink and the need for a woman. He had sufficient knowledge of Warsaw to

know where he might be able to find both together.

His car was a blue sports *Tatra*, imported from Czechoslovakia and one of the most popular models in Poland. The car was capable of high speeds and Pike required the application of the utmost self discipline not to yield to the natural impulse to go tearing through the streets of Warsaw as far and as quickly from *Stare Miasto* as possible.

But the burning corpse of the woman would not go unseen for long. The crime would be reported to the militia. Anyone seen hurrying from the scene of the murder would be imme-

diately suspect.

He cruised through the old city at a moderate speed. The single concession he made to his fear of capture was to make his route a tortuous one, using his familiarity with the locale to advantage, doubling and redoubling on his tracks so that at one

point he was even heading towards the river.

Still cruising casually he made his way out of the district. He turned the car out of the narrow streets into one of the main thoroughfares designed to carry traffic quickly across Warsaw. He picked on one particular trasa that arrowed staight as a die to the heart of the city by means of fly-overs and under-passes. One tunnel eventually spewed his car out close to Ulica Nowy Swiat—New World Street. He pushed the gas pedal a bit more now. Anybody who stopped him to ask questions was welcome to. He was a journalist and he was heading—or could say he was heading—on a legitimate mission to the square-fronted building with the big cut-out letters on its roof.

The letters read, 'Klub Miedzynarodowej Prasy' and there should be nothing sinister in a journalist heading for the

International Press Club.

Pike, on a whim, played the part so far as to drop into the club long enough to be seen and recognised by several fellow professionals. Then he got back to his quest for a drink and a woman.

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A novice would have plumped for one of the places signposted by the legend: 'BAR.' Richard Pike was no novice. A Polish 'BAR' was not the kind of bar he wanted. He had neither the desire nor the appetite for the goulash that was the passport to getting a drink in one of those mis-named establishments.

He settled for a small gospoda, the sort of place an English-

man would have called a pub.

It was fairly well filled, most of the tables being already taken by groups of locals, some groups all-male, others mixed. His practised eye picked out the table at the back with nobody

seated at it except the woman.

He took a place at the table. He made no other acknowledgement except a hard look at her which was returned with an equally hard look and he knew his guess had not been wrong. Without him having met her before, he knew this woman. Her sisters were universal. The only thing he did not know about this one was her name. He filled that omission without any attempt at delicacy.

"My name is Pike," he said. "Richard Pike. What's

your's ?"

She matched his boldness, as he had known she would.

"Wanda Zaborski," she told him.

"I intend to get drunk," he said. "Later I intend to sleep with you. Would you like to get drunk too?"

"You don't ask me about the other?"

" I don't have to."

A waiter sidled up to the table, asked whether they would

prefer beer or vodka.

"Vodka," Pike nominated, without consulting the girl. "And not the ordinary stuff. I'll have Zubrowka. Bring the bottle."

"You are a qualified drinker," said the girl.

"I've been around," Pike answered.

He looked her over as he would have looked over a piece of merchandise. She was not too bad, he admitted. Prettier than most and with the signs of a pertness and intelligence all too rare in her kind. He thought he was lucky, he should have no difficulty in forgetting the murder he had committed. She might even take his mind off the fact that tomorrow he would have to start the hunt all over again, the hunt that would culminate in a fifth murder. The fifth murder of the same man.

The waiter returned, put the bottle of pale green Zubrowka on the table. Pike opened his wallet, passed across a hundred zlotys, told the waiter to keep the change. What the hell if the tip was too large, Pike thought. Vodka was cheap for anyone in Warsaw, doubly cheap for a man like himself who had such a pressing need to get drunk.

He poured two glasses, ignored the girl's instinctive gesture to clink them together and swallowed his own glassful at one gulp.

The girl smiled. There was a hint of dare in her eyes and

she knocked back her vodka exactly as he had done.

"Wanda," said Pike, as he refilled the glasses, "we should have met before."

"Thank you, Pan."

"Let us not be formal. Don't call me Mister. I've grown accustomed to being called Citizen."

"Very well. Thank you, obywatel."

"And thank you, obywatelka," said Pike.

The twinkle of amusement which had been in the girl's eyes since the moment Pike had sat down beside her lit up even more.

"Why do you thank me?" she asked.

"For being you and for being here at the right time. Come on, we're wasting time talking. Let us get drunk."

When the bottle of Zubrowka was empty except for the long stem of grass that gave the liquor its distinctive herby flavour, he ordered another. They settled down to a steadier pace of drinking. Each was content to be silent. Pike because he had his own thoughts, the girl because she was studying him.

She found it difficult to place his age. If she had asked and he had told her in truth that he was forty-two she would have found that also difficult to believe. In some ways he looked

older, in others he looked younger.

She had noticed his length and the breadth that went with it as he had entered the gospoda. Pike was a big man and his step beckoned the strength and energy of youth. But apart from a black streak that ran back from a widow's peak low on his forehead his hair had the shock-white brittleness of an old man's.

The face beneath the hair was full of contradictions. The cheeks were still firmly fleshed but the lips were thin and tight. The eye sockets were deeply recessed but the black eyes within them burned with an intensity that would have frightened most women.

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Most of all, she noticed, he had not once smiled from the moment of their encounter. And again. if she had asked, he could have told her truthfully that he could not remember when he had last smiled.

Outside there was a noise. Heads turned at every table. In the night streets two cars went hurtling by, sirens wailing, spotlights probing. Pike was the only one who did not turn to stare. He was studying the grass in the bottle on the table.

"You are an incurious man, Richard Pike," the girl said.

"One might think you had expected them to pass."

Pike wondered if there was a question hidden in her words. He decided to be wary, yet gave her the benefit of the doubt.

"I am a newspaper man," he said. "I don't need to look. I've seen and heard the same things many times in many places. In Germany they drive in a black Mercedes and the sign says: 'POLIZEI.' Here in Warsaw the car is probably a Zim or a Zis and the sign says: 'MILICJA.'"

"That explains it." "Explains what?"

"Your eyes. You have the eyes of a man who has seen too much and did not like what he saw. Are you really that disillusioned, Richard?"

He wanted to avoid any questions that sounded in the

slightest way personal. He changed the subject adroitly.

"You would think," he said, "that the Russians would change the names of their cars. The M in Zim and the S in Zis stand for Molotov and Stalin, both of whom are now out of favour. You would think they would change the name of the factories and call the cars Ziks."

If he had succeeded in putting the girl off one line of questioning, he found it was only because he had started her on another train of thought. But at least this one was harmless because he had met it so many times before and had a stock answer ready.

"Are you anti-Communist, Richard?" she asked.

He gave his stock answer. "I am a freelance journalist, Wanda. I have to sell to eat. Therefore I have to sell a product which will appeal to the largest number of buyers. That means I am a neutral in the truest sense of the word. I report exactly what I observe. No comments. Only observations. But in spite of that, there are two newspapers which will not accept my syndicated material. One is *Pravda*—for the reason you just mentioned. *Pravda* sees me as a minion of the capitalistic etcetera and so on. The other is the *New York Herald Tribune* which is of the opinion that I am a fellow traveller."

The girl laughed out loud. "You are so serious!" she giggled. "I think we have been here too long. Buy another

bottle and we shall go home."

She pulled the laugh under control, made it an inviting smile. "You still want to?" she added.

"Have you a phone?" he asked.

The smile remained but her eyes showed her perplexity.

"I have to earn my bread and butter," he enlightened her. She burst out laughing again and repeated, "Oh, you are so serious, my Richard. Yes, I have the telephone. I have everything you need."

She stood up, held out a hand. "Are you coming?"

He spent the night and all of the next day at her flat. His extended stay was against his original intentions but he found that her companionship eased the tension of the past and the thought of the future from his mind far better than he had expected.

Later in the afternoon, after she had ascertained that he was not averse to spending a second night with her, she went shopping for groceries. He told her to bring back a copy of *Trybuna Ludu*, the People's Tribune. He wondered what the

national daily had to say about the murder.

When she had gone he tried to sleep. But without her proximity to divert him, he found sleep being pushed out of his mind by recurring thoughts of the man he had killed four times

and must seek out and kill once again.

He wondered what he would load the next bullet with. Lead had failed. Silver and potassium had failed. Yesterday's attempt with sodium had failed. But somewhere, he was sure, somewhere in the atomic table of Earth's elements there had to be something so foreign to his quarry's nature that it would really kill him before he had time to slough off the human body he had borrowed.

Then he wondered if it was worthwhile going on with the hunt. Why shouldn't he just ignore the ecdysiac? Everybody

else did.

He checked himself. He was taking a weak line of thought. The others did not ignore the ecdysiac. They did not even ECDYSIAC 65

know he existed. But he, Richard Pike knew. And because he knew and was the only one who knew, he simply had to go on with the hunt.

Maybe someday he would find someone who shared his perception and then the odds would be two-to-one. Maybe.

When the door of the apartment clicked open he did not shift his position on the bed. He was lying with his hands locked behind his head, his eyes fixed on the ceiling, his thoughts far away.

"Richard-"

He snapped back to alertness. The uncanny intuitive sense of self-preservation which had kept him alive through one war and four murders detected extreme danger from the inflection the girl had put on the single word.

He sat up, swung his legs off the bed and stood in a fighting

crouch, all in one flowing movement.

He sat down again. The contest was too unequal. He might have taken the pair of grim-faced giants who flanked Wanda in the doorway if they had been unarmed. But he was not prepared to argue with the revolvers which were pointed accurately and steadily in his direction.

The men wore the olive green, almost khaki, uniform of the

militia.

"Wanda," he said dispassionately, "you must ask your superior for promotion. You are not the first woman I have met who went to the same lengths in the call of duty. But you actually managed to fool me. I was foolish enough to think you

enjoyed my company last night."

She looked genuinely apologetic. "I am sorry, Richard. I was only doing my job. If it is any consolation, last night was good for me too. I advise you to go with these men quietly. It is only for questioning. Do not try to fight them. I would not like to see you getting hurt. I am too fond of you for wishing that."

" Me and how many others?"

Pike's rhetoric question was made without rancour or bitterness. He did not blame the girl. As she had said, it was her job and he had met the same fanatical devotion to duty before. He blamed himself for relaxing his vigilance.

He shouldered into his jacket. "What do they want to

question me about?" he asked.

The girl flicked a wary glance to either side of her. "That is not for me to say," she answered. "Go with them and you will find out. Here is your newspaper."

She had folded it so that he could not fail to see the quarterpage report on the previous night's murder on the bank of the

Vistula.

Pike accepted the paper and her unspoken reply to his

question. He said, ambiguously, "Thank you."

He added, "Don't go away, Wanda. I liked you. I'll be back when they release me after questioning. I'm sure they are making some mistake."

He repeated the last sentence as he was being led into a small room at the headquarters of the militia. He addressed the words to nobody in particular and for all the attention that was paid nobody seemed to have heard.

The room was furnished with one desk, two chairs and a steel filing cabinet. The daylight was shut out by heavy drapes. A single lamp burned bright on the desk. Behind the desk sat a slim, bald-headed man. His insignia credited him with the rank of captain.

"Dzien dobry, obywatel Pike," said the militia captain.

" Siadaj !"

Pike sat down in obedience to the order.

He said, "Good day to you also, Kapitan. And now that you have established that I understand Polish, what next? Perhaps I can save you some time by telling you that I am equally fluent in German, Russian, Italian, Spanish—"

The captain put up a hand, palm outwards.

He said, "These things are already known, citizen Pike."

"I have already seen an example of your thoroughness," said Pike, remembering the girl. "What can I do for you, Kapitan? And which Kapitan am I facing, just in case something happens that means I have to call my embassy?"

" Paderewski."

" A distinguished name, Kapitan."

"I try to keep it thus. And I am sure there will be no need for consulting your embassy. Not unless you are guilty of something of which I am ignorant. Eh, citizen?"

Richard Pike had the captain summed up in a flash. This little bald-headed man with the old-fashioned pince-nez was crafty and cunning. He was the sort who would ask questions

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along one line while concealing the real reason for the grilling. Pike decided to take the initiative.

He said, "I am certain, Kapitan, that I have infringed no traffic rules. I have made no adverse comment on the Polish Workers' Party in my articles. And my movements for last night can be alibied by your bewitching citizen Wanda Zaborski."

"Ah, yes. Last night." The captain adjusted his pince-nez. "I see you have a copy of the *People's Tribune* in your hand. Have you read it?"

"Not yet."

"Please do. Look at the front page and tell me what you see."

Pike did not make the mistake of pretending not to see the item on the murder. He said, "It seems a middle-aged woman was shot at the riverside last night. The militia—no offence to you Kapitan Paderewski—appear to be puzzled by the nature of the shooting. The body was burning when it was found. Shall I go on?"

The captain tapped a pile of cuttings on his desk.

"These," he said, "are reports on the murder which have been taken from many national papers. I have noticed that not one of them carries your byline."

"I was busy last night. As you know. Besides, I don't

report that sort of stuff."

"Quite so, quite so." The captain went to the filing cabinet, opened the top drawer, extracted a much thicker pile of cuttings He fanned them across the desk. They were printed in many different languages but their common denominator was the name of Richard Pike beneath the tabloid headings.

"You recognise these?"

"They are mine. I didn't know I had such an ardent

follower of my work."

The captain smiled. "The collection is not mine. It was sent to me from Interpol in France. Perhaps your admirer is a little typist there, perhaps, eh? Now let me see. This one... this other . . . and this one." The captain had separated three cuttings from the pile. He pushed them forward so that Pike could see them clearly.

"You were saying you did not report murders-"

Pike gave the cuttings only a cursory glance. He knew which ones they were.

"Reporting implies a certain immediacy, Kapitan. Each of these was written several days after the murders mentioned."

"Just so. I was wondering what you will write a few days from now about last night's killing. That is the only reason I

brought you here."

"Captain," said Pike, "I do not know the world's annual figure for murders. But just because I wrote about three in the past, what makes you think I should have anything to say about the murder in *Stare Miasto* last night?"

"Circumstances. Nothing more. Each of the victims you wrote about had disappeared many months before they turned up again. And when they turned up they were dead. Anna Grabski also disappeared about half a year ago. She was found last night. Murdered."

"Missing people interest me."

"Oh, come now, citizen! I will admit that you were the only newspaper man to dig out the fact that the three victims had been missing persons. But what about those other articles which always appeared within a day or two of the items on the murders ?"

"Which articles are those?"

The captain adjusted his pince-nez and began to read.

"One: 'A financial empire collapsed yesterday in China when a famous industrialist failed to put in an appearance at the A.G.M.' There is more, of course, but that is the cogent sentence. It was written at the time of the trouble in Korea. It was also written-"

The captain consulted one of the first set of cuttings.

"-one week after a middle-aged Chinese airport baggage man was found shot through the head. With a silver bullet of all things."

Pike's black eyes gave nothing away but he tensed himself to

be warier than ever of this quiet-spoken militia captain.

"Two," the other went on. "American merchant banker, Bradley Ford, left his suite at the Waldorf Astoria seventeen days ago, telling the receptionist to expect him back within one hour. Since then no one has seen him. Meanwhile, diligent T-men from the Treasury Department have discovered that vast sums of money entrusted to Ford were being channeled into the coffers of the-"

Pike cut in. "You need not go on. I know it by heart. I

wrote it, remember?"

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"As you please. But do you remember that seventeen days before you wrote that article a negro street-sweeper was found dead not more than a block from the Waldorf Astoria with a bullet in his back? This negro, like Anna Grabski last night, was also badly burned. It transpired that the bullet which killed him was made of metallic potassium."

"You might as well get to the point, Kapitan. What are you

implying?"

Paderewski ignored the question.

He said, "I will pass over the third article which is only a repetition of a similar incident. Instead, I now come to a separate article which you wrote recently. In this article you disclosed that after intensive enquiries you could find no one who could actually remember Bradley Ford or the Chinese industrialist or the other man who disappeared about the same time as somebody else was murdered.'

"What I wrote was true."

"I know it was. You see, citizen, that is why Interpol sent me these cuttings. They made the same enquiries and they too found that Bradley Ford and the others never existed as far as anyone could remember. And Interpol is interested to know what line of politics you are pushing."

Richard Pike sighed. Here it was again. Always the insinuation that he was a deep-blue capitalist and/or a Red.

Wearily, he said, "Everybody worries too much about politics. I've said this before and I say it again-I am not interested in politics. Not in the petty little manoeuvring for superiority that goes on between nations. Maybe they should stop and think there might be politics of a far more serious nature to worry about."

The militia captain got out from behind his desk, went to the door, checked that nobody was outside, locked the door and

went back to his seat.

"Pike," he said, "haven't you wondered how it was that Wanda Zaborski knew which gospoda you would visit? I can see you haven't. Well, think about it."

"I assume you had girls like her planted in several places. Evidently you know enough about my habits to figure that I

would look for a drink and a woman fairly regularly."

Very quietly, the captain said, "What does he look like to vou ?"

Pike's eves narrowed. "Who?"

"The man you have killed several times and killed again last night."

Pike jumped out of his seat.

The captain warned, "Don't be foolish. Can't you see that I am the friend you have hoped to find for many years?"

" Friend ?"

"Someone with the same perception that you have."

Pike settled back in his seat. He suddenly felt old and tired. He desperately wanted to believe the captain but at the same time . . .

"Tell me what you know," he said. "Or what you think

you know."

"It is exactly as you believe, my friend. While we on Earth have manoeuvred nation against nation, others more powerful than we have manoeuvred whole planets. There is an immensely greater political struggle going on and we, as a world, are being used as pawns. I cannot guess, and I don't suppose you can either, who the protagonists are. What I do know, in company with you, is that an agent-provocateur has been present on Earth for many years trying to incite us to self-destruction so that our planet can be used by his people for . . . well, I'm not sure, perhaps a military base in the greater struggle."

To Richard Pike the captain's words spelled immense relief.

No longer would he have to bear his burden alone.

He could not remember how his perception had started. But he remembered the time.

For many years he had been convinced that Adolf Hitler was not the prime motivator of the German people in their ill-fated war. Sense and reason told him the ex-corporal did not have the stature for the job. But however hard he studied the members of Hitler's team he could not find the one he was sure was the true leader.

Then, within a few days of Hitler's death, he found what he

was looking for.

Pike, as he was now known, was himself a German. He had served as a war correspondent. His loyalty to his country had been badly strained by the things he had seen done. When he was invited to the Feuhrer's last press conference he had been so sickened by the mad harangue that he had shut his ears and let his mind wander.

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And that was when he first saw the stocky figure of the man who pulled the strings that made Hitler dance. When he cautiously questioned other reporters after the conference he discovered that no one else had seen the man.

They said the person at Hitler's side had been Eva Braun.

Days later, at the incident of the bunker, the body beside Hitler's was that of a woman, Eva Braun. But the seeds of doubt had been sown in Pike's mind. He knew different. Something—he called it a man—had inhabited the body of a woman named Eva Braun. At the moment of death he had abandoned the body.

Pike went looking for the man. Every time he saw a sudden rocketing to power by anyone he went to investigate. Most times what he found was genius receiving its just reward. But there were other times. Like the time he discovered the Bradley Ford bank had mushroomed into being yet no one could tell

him exactly what Bradley Ford looked like.

He spent months making sure, very sure. Then he shot him. And when the short stocky body mutated to a negro corpse he knew he had failed.

To the captain he said, "I call him an ecdysiac; because he can slough off his assumed bodies like a snake sloughs its skin.

Tell me about Anna Grabski."

"There is nothing much to tell. A housewife, forty-nine, as ordinary as a million other women. She disappeared—her husband came to the militia for help—about six months ago. Simultaneous with her disappearance we began to have trouble in Warsaw. Someone was trying to stir up discontent among the people, discontent with the Polish Workers Party, trying to convince them that they should oust the socialist P.P.R., and go for something more positive. To anyone else the two events were disconnected but I had been reading your articles and I suddenly was gifted with the same insight as you have."

Pike asked, "You have seen him?"

"Not personally. But we have a third member of our tiny group of disbelievers. I refer to Wanda Zaborski. She came to me with a story which bore such a close relationship to your articles that I believed her. She said she had gone to a meeting in a factory on the other side of the Vistula, in Praga, and while everyone else thought it was a middle-aged woman preaching riot to them, Wanda saw a middle-aged man, short and stocky."

"Then it was no accident that I bumped into Wanda?"

"None at all. We expected you to do what you did. We could not help. You were the expert, the one with practice behind you. But we knew your habits so well that it was simply a matter of waiting for the killing to be done and then following you."

"Impossible. I doubled, redoubled my tracks—"

The captain coughed apologetically. "Er-a small device attached to your car enabled us to plot your course. When we finally saw you were heading for that particular gospoda, we cut ahead and Wanda was waiting there when you arrived."
"And now?" asked Pike. "Now what do we do?"

"We go on looking for your ecdysiac. Only now there are three of us in the hunt instead of one. For the moment I suggest you return to citizen Wanda Zaborski and tomorrow. when you are refreshed, we can plan our campaign."

They left it at that. Pike took a trolley car back to the girl's flat. In spite of the captain's assurances that the odds were now three-to-one he had a niggling doubt at the back of his mind which he could not quite pinpoint.

He asked Wanda. "Do you think we can trust the captain?"

"I think so. Richard-"

" Yes ?"

"What about the other one? Surely he must sooner or later attempt to retaliate and instead of being the hunter you will be the hunted."

Pike shook his head. "I'm small fry to him. All I am is a

nuisance. He knows I can't really kill him."

"Perhaps even being a nuisance will give him sufficient motive in time. I think we should make sure he stays dead next time."

"I wish it was that easy. God knows I've tried."

"What about a gas-filled bullet? Say fluorine, pressurised and liquefied."

"I don't have the equipment," Pike said.

Then he dropped to the side of the bed where she lay.

He asked, "What made you say fluorine? I mean why not chlorine, helium, argon, anything? Why fluorine?"

She looked so pretty and innocent still. "Richard, you have understood so much. Don't you understand the rest?"

"I think maybe I do."

Pike got off the bed, backed away.

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"You're as bad as he is," he accused. "You want to use my Earth for the same dirty purposes as he does. For a man with a gift for super perception I am nothing but a dumkopf! The only difference between you and him is that you work for opposing factions. That's why you want him dead. And Earth is just the playground where you act out your political battles."

He flexed his strong fingers and advanced to the girl on the bed.

"Don't try it, Richard," she warned.

Hatred and loathing made him deaf. He reached his hands for her neck. Too late he saw her slip a gun from under her pillow, a gun of a type he had never seen before.

She shot him from two feet away, recoiling up the bed as he

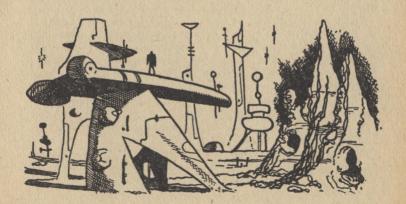
slumped across her feet.

Prompty at nine next morning, Kapitan Stanislaw Paderewski of the Warsaw militia opened the door of his office to admit his caller.

"Good morning, citizen Pike," he said.

Those were his last words.

Robert Presslie



The computer had been set to design an infallible defensive weapon of certain specifications. Its interpretation of those requirements, however, was something radical and eliminated war for ever.

The Big Tin God by PHILIP E. HIGH

There was no fighting in the strictest sense of the word, but there was 'resistance,' which is another interpretation. The suspect, therefore, took exception to open arrest—this was a police action, providing, of course, you were a policeman. If you were not you could call it unprovoked aggression.

Maxton called it exactly that. "Major, I don't care what you call yourself. You can be a police or peace officer, you can represent Interlaw, U.N.O., Nationpol or any other high-faluting name which suits but in my book you're still an enemy officer. In my book you still entered the city as a civilian and turned into military when it suited you."

Wendell sucked at a limp-looking cigarette and glowered at him. His own conscience was none too clear but he fought back. "You made far too many threats, it is the duty of

Interlaw to prevent war before it occurs."

Maxton laughed jerkily and with contempt. "We boasted, yes, but our threat was economic not military. We were racing ahead of you in technology so you had to move in and take over fast."

"I am not here to apportion responsibility." Wendell looked cold. "I am here to interrogate."

"And anything I say may be taken down and used against

me-correct ?"

Wendell sighed. "You will be confined to your quarters until further notice."

When an armed escort had taken the other away, the interrogator sighed again. Life was pretence, wasn't it? Of course he was an enemy soldier no matter what he called himself and, yes, it was armed aggression no matter what the banner of righteousness.

He was suddenly depressed. No matter what happened or what the practical idealist managed to bring about, the human race was still fissionable material which all too easily became critical.

Heaven above knew they'd tried. The League of Nations, U.N.O., Nationpol and lastly Interlaw. All had added their quotas of treatment, many of them brutal, but what had been achieved? They had even gone so far as nation-mixing—nation-mixing, the shifting of entire populations to cure nationalisms. It sounded good at first but the shifted races were soon indentifying themselves with their adopted countries.

Nationpol tried splitting countries into Sectors and finally

into sub-sectors containing cities.

Wendell scowled and ground out his cigarette. Now, instead of nationalism, you had cityism which, since the major cities now housed anything between ten and a hundred million people raised a major problem. There was, however, an even graver problem—Interlaw. Theoretically Interlaw was drawn from and supported by, all sectors and all cities. Unfortunately, however, Interlaw, as a body, had developed paranoia. She had developed into a first class parasite demanding the best in supplies and technical 'cream' the cities could provide. Interlaw considered herself superior to any city, she was a kind of motherly gangster who said: 'I'll protect you or else.' Somewhere ideal had been quietly disposed of, leaving the instrument to ruthless men.

Wendell lit another cigarette and scowled. Yes, Maxton had been right. This community's threat had been economic not military, although, no doubt, General Greevon the sector mayor, had long term policies. God, the city had been racing ahead, hadn't it? There had been major break-throughs in almost every scientific field and some of the devices tended to render Interlaw completely impotent inside ten years—how?

The caller went, interrupting his thoughts and he touched a

switch. "Yes?"

"Sir." Breaker looked hot and alarmed. "We've found something, these people have an undercity complete with laboratories, factories, and an entire transport system."

"Transport system—how big is it?"

"As near as we can tell, about twelve miles long and six wide."

"I'll be right with you." Wendell was calling for a command car before he had broken contact.

"That's an entrance, sir." Breaker jerked his thumb at a supra-steel door which was disguised as a blank wall. "A patrol found it while searching for snipers. It was open then

but it closed before they could get to it."

Wendell frowned. A side track in an underground transport system was a good hiding place and their counter-intelligence must be first class. Interlaw, despite its ramifications, had had no inkling of this, only a rumour of some super electronic brain which might, or might not, account for the scientific ascendancy.

Technicians arrived with cutting instruments and a portable solar-burner on a tripod. It took nearly forty minutes to cut a hole in the door large enough to take a compact-charge. The resulting energy discharge left a hole large enough to admit three men but it left the metal almost molten and the

technicians had to cool it.

They passed through it warily and found themselves in what might have been a major highway. A flock of spy-eyes preceded them and someone had begun operating a vocal beam. "Officers of Interlaw are now entering this section of your city in the lawful execution of their duty—"

In the distance there was a flicker of light and one of the

technicians fell stiffly forward and lay still.

Wendell flicked a switch on his belt which called the combat squads and ran for cover but there was no further firing until the combat squads arrived.

"Citizens are reminded that resisting arrest or obstructing the police in lawful execution of their duty is punishable under section two." Beside him, Grayling said: "What hypocrisy."

The two men understood each other and Wendell nodded, ducking as advancing combat men leapt over his prone body and ran forward. "Worse, there seems to be a lot of obstruction."

After a time they were able to go forward but there had been considerable resistance. Wendell stopped near one of the bodies and bent down, frowning. The dead man had once belonged to the city and wore a uniform which was forbidden under Interlaw but it was not this which attracted Wendell's attention.

"How long have we been using Cardiac guns as standard

weapons?"

"Cardiac guns?" Grayling shook his head. "That's a new one on me."

"Take a look at this man's face, it's indicative. You'll find

no marks on the body."

Grayling looked and paled. "What sort of weapon is

this ?"

"It was once very useful to remove a person discretely due to a heart attack. Unfortunately, there was a plague of heart attacks and people became suspicious. This weapon coagulates the blood—some people call this weapon a thrombosis gun."

"And now we're using it as a standard weapon?"

"True, after publicly outlawing it some two years ago."

Grayling nodded. "We don't change much, do we? I seem to remember in history that they outlawed the dum-dum bullet, having, of course, successfully won a war with it first." He shook his head slowly. "Sometimes, you know, I wonder —I wonder if it isn't about time another kind of intelligence took over."

"Yes." Wendell was curt. Too often, he wondered why he kept going, why he bothered, when he himself was nothing but a tool of a corrupt organisation which called itself the law.

An hour later resistance was over but it had been bitter, worse, however, was the information that the operation had only just begun. Several hundred feet below this level was another where, apparently, the real work, whatever it was, was being carried out. A number of 'arrests' however, gave

Wendell enough information to call his team together and begin interrogation.

He set up his equipment in the first vacant office he found

and ran off some printed lists.

"I want these men, they're boffins. Apparently below us is some sort of super project involving a cybernetic brain. These men have valuable information and I want them brought in as soon as they are found. Oh, yes, I want Brogas at the top of the list badly. Not only is he their top scientist but evidence leads me to suppose he worked under coercion."

An officer entered and saluted. "Technical report, sir. All

installations captured intact."

"Intact!" Wendell was incredulous. "There was no

attempt at sabotage?"

"None, sir, but, if I may offer an opinion, I'm not happy about it."

"Go on, please."

"Well, sir, prisoners are cocky, really cocky, not reactively arrogant as one might expect. None of them are cowed and, although they don't say it in words, their general attitude suggests that our occupation is initial only. These underground workers, in complete contrast to the surface population, behave as if they hold the winning cards."

Wendell frowned. "Well for their personal information, those convicted of resisting arrest are due for personality erasure, tell them that. Tell them that General Greevon, their inspired leader, is a prisoner in our hands and is to be indicted on a war-incitement charge. The information properly put

over may deflate quite a few egos."

"I hope so, sir, but I doubt it." The officer saluted again

and withdrew.

Wendell scowled after him unhappily. His own men were not usually wrong and if Mellor said the prisoners were cocky they were—but why?

The door slid open again for another officer, behind him was a civilian in grey coveralls escorted by two armed privates.

The officer saluted. "Number seven on your list, sir—Savirin Malkirk."

Wendell said: "You may sit down." Then to the officer,

"Where did you find him?"

"In a sort of cell, sir—er—rather like a monk's cell save that it was equipped with special recording instruments and a large

number of tapes. The door, for some unknown reason, was supra-steel and about four inches thick. We had to get special torches to cut a hole in it."

"And when you'd opened it, did the prisoner try and defend

himself?"

"No, sir, he seemed stunned to see us. He had no idea the place had been under attack or had fallen to our troops."

" Any comments?"

"Well, sir, when we ordered him out he laughed and said: Certainly, you're too damn late now, anyway.' The prisoner refused to explain what he meant but from an examination of his cell we conclude he'd been shut in there about four weeks engaged on some special task."

"Thank you—have you a place of custody ready for this man

when I've finished with him?"

"Oh, yes, sir, several rooms have been made ready for civilians."

"Fine." Wendell turned to the prisoner. "Have you

anything to say?"

Malkirk made snorting noises through his nose. "Under the articles of Interlaw, you are entitled to my name, age, place of work and home address, if any."

"You understand that this city is now in our hands?"

"Does that remark infer that you are now prepared to waive the said articles on the pretext of military expedience?" Malkirk succeeded in looking both accusing and haughty.

"All right." Wendell sighed and turned to the officer.

Take this creep away and lock him up—mind he doesn't fall

off his high-horse on the way."

The next prisoner was depressingly frank, however. "I'll tell you all I can but I'm afraid it won't do you any good. I fed data into a special unit, that data went to the 'brain,' our special cybernetic unit." He smiled, showing large, widely spaced teeth. "We call it, Dopey, you know, but I'm afraid Dopey is beyond your reach, relatively it's only a few hundred feet but we have that unit triggered. If your experts start pushing probes around, sooner or later they'll hit something then—bang!" The prisoner smiled again and spread his hands. "Nothing left of you, Humpty Dumpty. You know the rhyme, no doubt, all the King's horses, etcetera—"

Wendell cut short the flow of words with a gesture to the

officer. "Remove this comedian," he said, sourly.

An hour passed before the search teams flushed out Brogas. the project director, from another cell at the end of a remote corridor.

"Sit down, please." Wendell was irritably aware that Breaker was breathing heavily behind him, unfortunately he

had the right to be here.

Brogas sat. He was a big man with an aggressive, deeply clefted chin and greying wiry black hair standing straight up from his scalp. "Interrogation, yes, co-operation, yes." He looked directly at Wendell with intensely blue eves. "What do you want to know?"

"Everything you can tell us." Wendell knew he should feel elated but somehow he had already lost faith. There was something about this business which assured him that it had

already gone sour.

"Where do I begin-cigarette?"

"We know you have the biggest cybernetic brain in the world." Grayling extended his case. "What, at the moment,

is its primary project."
"Thanks." Brogas puffed gratefully. "Let's get one thing straight from the start, the brain is not the only thing we have. This brain is hooked electronically to auto-factories, precision instruments, chemicals and equipment. You see, Dopey not only finds the solution but he builds it as well."

"You mean this brain was asked for a missile, fed data, framework specifications and so on and came up with an A.E.T.S?" Wendell had an inexplicable sensation of cold in

the pit of his stomach.

"That's the size of it. Everything Dopey has conceived he

has also built himself."

"Our Intelligence is of the opinion that your-er-brain, is now engaged on a masterpiece."

Brogas blew a passable smoke ring. "In view of the local security impositions your Intelligence branch must be outstanding-yes, Dopey is creating his masterpiece, even I am not quite sure what it is."

"Not sure." Breaker sounded disbelieving.

Brogas sighed. "Look, each expert was confined to a sealed cell, as you've found out. Each was entrusted to feed certain data to the brain but each was unaware of the other's information. Apparently there was a master plan, each of us had a part of it, but only the General had the lot. Now, of course, Dopey has it and is working it out in his own peculiar fashion."

Again Wendell felt the peculiar unease in his stomach. "This brain can decide just how he's going to do the job?"

"Oh, yes, we only state what we want and impose a limitation framework respecting size, weight, stress resistance and so on. How he carries out those instructions and with what materials and motive power is entirely his business."

"You speak," said Grayling slowly, "as if this damn brain

was alive."

Brogas stubbed out the cigarette and looked up. "Well?" Grayling paled slightly but did not answer.

"You've no idea what this project is at all?" Wendell was

beginning to feel resigned.

"I can make two guesses—an ultimate weapon or an ultimate weapon-bearer, if you can make sense of that."

"I think I can." This time Grayling had lost all his colour.

"It could be a warrior robot."

Brogas made depreciating sounds with his tongue. "Now there's a happy thought—Dopey is due to give birth, as it were, in ten hours. As your men have no doubt discovered by now, corridor Twenty-five ends in a blank wall. That 'wall' is a supra-steel door five feet thick which Dopey will open when he's ready."

"We'll have to blast it open." Breaker was sweating.

"I've told you, it's triggered and I don't mean to a grenade."

Breaker glowered at him. "It seems to me you can afford to be co-operative and I'd also like to know just how much of himself a man can sell without losing his soul. It seems to me that this coercion one hears so much about is a convenient safe conduct ticket on one side and an open cheque on the other. It strikes me, having done rather well under General Greevon, you can turn that ticket over for the benefit of an Interlaw court. In my opinion, a scientist of your calibre, should submit to torture rather than sell out his own race."

Strangely Borgas did not lose his temper. "How old are you—ten? Haven't you ever seen life outside a solidio drama? Torture! What age are you living in, boy? They don't tell you, they don't threaten you, they don't even address you personally. They just sit you in front of a screen which looks straight into the front room of your own apartment. You can

see your wife in the big blue chair, the blank faced guards at the door and your kids with frightened, tear-stained faces. A guard prods your little girl towards the screen. 'There's your

father, tell him, dear, tell him."

Brogas clenched his fists briefly. Then your little girl starts whimpering. 'Daddy, don't let them take mummy away, don't let them hurt us.'" The scientist rose. "I'll tell you something, my naive friend, at times like that, one woman and three small children are the entire human race. One day, when you grow up, perhaps you'll understand."

"You insolent swine." Breaker flushed angrily.

"Breaker." Wendell's voice was so soft it was almost inaudible, but the other heard it.

"What-oh-yes, sir?"

"Mr. Breaker." Wendell did not even bother to look at him. "We have with us a scientist not only willing to answer our questions but prepared to co-operate. His accusation of naivity on your part I will not only endorse but loudly applaud, your world is obviously confined to the mock heroics of a contrived drama and you are, in consequence, boorishly arrogant and wholly irresponsible." Wendell paused and looked at Grayling. "Kindly refer those remarks to official record and arrange for immediate transport out—Mr. Breaker is relieved of duty."

When Breaker had gone Wendell sighed with a relief. A little more of this sort of thing and Brogas would dry up like a spring in dry weather. God, where did Personnel dig up

people like Breaker?

He turned back to the scientist. " Is there any way in which

we can determine this brain's end product?"

"Only by questioning all the scientists feeding it data and even then we cannot be sure. We may have a clearer picture but much of the data is in mathematical formula which might take a long time to break down."

"If you had some data could you get an outline?"

"I might."

"Give some encouragement for God's sake, four of your scientists were killed in the attack and one, Malkirk, is a loyalist."

"Leave Malkirk to me, he's only loyal if not threatened." Wendell looked shocked. "I can't do that, I can't use force on a civilian prisoner."

Brogas beamed. "You can't but I can. Further, under the articles of Interlaw, you cannot interfere with purely civil affairs until the appointment of a joint control commission unless those said affairs endanger occupation forces or equipment—these don't."

"But I'll be here." Wendell was aware that his tone carried

more emphasis than sincerity.

Brogas dismissed it with a gesture. "Bad vision, old boy, you never saw it. No need to worry, I'm not putting him on a rack, just applying a little more pressure than your authority permits."

Much to the good of Wendell's conscience, Brogas handled the affair with a ruthless sang-froid, giving the loyalist no time

to argue or draw breath.

"As you are aware, my dear Malkirk, I have always been opposed to the regime and I am now working openly for the Interlaw. I share the opinion of the experts that Dopey is due to give birth to something diabolical. In my opinion that something may endanger the entire race and, therefore, we should know something about it in advance. We cannot learn more, however, without access to certain information—" Brogas rose and encircled Malkirk's neck with both hands. "Shall we have a little talk about certain classified data?

Much to Wendell's relief Malkirk whimpered once, blustered

and then began to talk.

At the end of three hours they had collected his information and a great deal more from the other surviving scientists. It took Brogas and Grayling almost two more to break down some of the simpler mathematics and itemize the results, then they stood back and looked at their findings.

"No." Grayling's voice was subdued. "It must be a weapon. I hold degrees in robotomy and nothing on Earth, not even Dopey as you call him, could build a robot to specifi-

cations like that."

"You could be right." Brogas sounded resigned. "I just find it hard to visualise a weapon which is twenty-five per cent amphibious."

They laid the paper almost reverently in front of Wendell.

"Sixty per cent of the necessary data is lacking," apologised Brogas. "That's the best we could do with what we could get. I'm afraid we're not much nearer than before."

Wendell picked up the paper and was shocked at its brevity, all that toil and sweat to get so little.

The data was itemised under two simple positive and

negative headings :-

IT MUST

1) Be 75% self-repairing.

2) Adaptable (?)
3) 25% Amphibious

4) Possess a decision/assimilitive/ retentive reasoning mechanism.

5) Contain within itself the means (3) or factors necessary for the construction of similar units without human intervention.

6) Function in a normal atmo- (4) Contain rare or highly sphere within the following tem-

perature ranges . . .

IT MUST NOT

(1) Be confined to one type of fuel or energy source.

(2) Require comprehen-

sive spares.

Require new factory lay-out or extensive retooling of existing plants.

expensive elements.

Temperature figures not included in the information— Brogas.

Wendell looked up, frowning. "Your guess is as good as mine—and you say that General Greevon knows what this is?"

"No," said Borgas, quickly. "As I tried to explain, the General knows what he wants, not what Dopey will give him. For instance, he might have stated baldly that he wanted a digging instrument. Thinking only in conventional terms consider what he might get—an excavator, a nuclear-borer, a drill, explosives, or a spade."

Wendell said, "Thank you," tiredly and resisted a temptation to scratch a prickling scalp. "Was General Greevon an intelligent man-intelligent enough to consider possible

repercussions?"

"No." Brogas sounded without hope. "He was politically astute but otherwise a strutting hysteric which, to be frank, frightens me."

Wendell nodded. "It frightens me, too." "Surely," began Grayling, "we can-"

He was interrupted by a clicking sound in the corner and printed tape ejected itself from a slot in the wall. Light flickered round the slot to attract attention, then there was a final click and the section of the tape fell to the floor.

Grayling picked it up and laid it on Wendell's desk.

"Well, I'm-" Wendell stopped, feeling cold inside. On the tape the small but clearly visible print had a character and malevolence all its own :-

Since alarms have indicated the illegal occupation of the area by hostile troops this message is addressed to the officers and men of the occupation forces.

WARNING

In two hours the first two units of warrior machines will be released from the production mechanisms. The warrior unit has been fully briefed both in its role and the techniques of assault It is fully educated to its environment and will be found capable of question and response. It will commandeer the types of fuel necessary for continued efficiency.

ANY ATTEMPT TO MOLEST, DESTROY OR PREVENT THE WARRIOR REACHING THE SURFACE WILL TRIGGER THE DEMOLITION CHARGE. PRODUCT-ION WILL BE REGULAR. ANY ATTEMPT TO DIS-ORGANISE THE BUILD-UP OF WARRIOR UNITS TO THE LEVEL OF TEN LAND DIVISIONS WILL ALSO TRIGGER THE CHARGE.

IMPORTANT NOTE. Demolition Shyper 10.

Wendell held out the note without speaking, he was past caring about a greasy face and unsteady hands. S/hyper 10 was a formula not for an explosive but a disruption, the brief but calamitous bridging of sol and time/space would cause a distortion of matter which would not only destroy the entire system but endanger the galaxy as well. God, the blasted machine had them by the short hairs—what had he thought about a big tin god?

"Ten land divisions!" Grayling was shocked by something

else. "That's a million and a half."

"That's not all my friend." Brogas was grim. "Refer to our little list of compiled information, item five; "Unit must contain within itself the means or factors necessary for the construction of similar units without human intervention. You can multiply that figure by any number you like, ten land divisions is Dopey's production target not theirs. We'll have to stand clear until his production quota is finished and then-"

"It will be too damn late," Grayling concluded for him.

Wendell brushed sweat from his face and sighed. He was so frightened now he was almost numb. "I thought we could handle this. I had a pretty little picture of a nice cosy line up of weapons laid on our unit's birthday party, but now-now we've got to bow and let it trundle past. No wonder prisoners were cocky, they knew Dopey had something laid on for ultimate victory. Several million mechanical creeps can not only threaten the Empire but demand the release of General Greevon as well." He rose abruptly, almost shifting the desk. "We havn't much time left. Let's go down and watch this warrior unit march past disdainfully, knowing we dare not touch it."

"I doubt if a robot would care." Brogas sighed. grim fact remains however that we will."

Wendell had imagined the wait would seem long but the immensely thick door slid aside and a voice boomed at them before he was ready for either.

"An inspection of the finished product for groups of less

than four is now permitted," said the voice.

They looked at each other doubtfully then Brogas thrust out his chin. "My job, I'm partly responsible."

They watched him walk steadily towards the doorway and

pass inside.

It seemed a very long time before he came out and when he

did he avoided their eyes.

"It fulfilled the specifications, I can't get over that." He sounded dazed and unhappy. "Makes you wonder how we began." He shook his head irritably as if trying to clear his mind. "Yes, our friend Greevon had a brilliant idea but he forgot that all weapons are two edged."

"Surely-" began Grayling, reaching out his hand.

Brogas brushed him aside. "When you've seen it, join me. I have six bottles of very potent illegal brew hidden away in a store room. You'll need a drink then, that's if you can read the writing on the wall—the human race is on its way out." He turned quickly and strode down the corridor.

Wendell stared after him then scowled. There was only one

answer, go in and see for himself.

As he entered the door a pointer-arrow appeared on the wall and he followed it, conscious of a shaky sensation in his stomach and a dry brittle feeling to his skin. He rounded a

corner and stopped dead, staring.

Presently he turned and walked slowly back. Brogas was right, the thing fulfilled the specifications and, unless something was done—what could be done?—yes, the human race was on its way out.

The warrior units, two of them, side by side, had the advantage of specialised education and precise preparation for a specific task. They looked nearly but not quite human—could you call a robot human? Only they were not quite robots were they? What did you call an organic robot?

The big tin god had exercised the supreme right of all gods and created life. Dopey had not only fulfilled his orders but

had built himself a man.

Philip E. High

THE LITERARY LINE-UP

As can be expected of author Lan Wright, the plot complications in the second part of "Dawn's Left Hand," become extremely involved as Regan assumes the role of Manuel Cabrera and finds that he not only has the major political factions of Earth lined up against him but also most of the

Cabrera family.

Next month also gives us an opportunity of including short stories by new writers Peter Vaughan (an RAF Technician somewhere in the BFPO area) and Gordon Walters, plus a novelette by Donald Malcolm entitled "Twice Bitten," and another Francis G. Rayer story, "Aqueduct." Guest Editor next month will be author James White, just to keep his name before you.

Story ratings for No. 121 were:

- The Colonist - - Joseph Green
 Minor Operation (conclusion) - Brian W. Aldiss
- 3. One Foot In The Door - Robert Presslie
- 4. The Thousand Deep - E. R. James
 5. Variant - - Francis G. Rayer

Two men alone on the surface of an alien planet devoid of all life and one of them apparently killed by the discharge of an ionized weapon. It was a clear case of murder—yet the murderer went unpunished in the end.

BURDEN OF PROOF

by DAVID JAY

This business will mean my dismissal from the Space Exploration Service, of course. I realise that, and I also realise that nothing I can say or do now is going to help Alan Carson. But Alan was once a good friend of mine, and as it seems that I'm the only member of the *Artemis*' crew who's prepared to stick his neck out, I propose doing just that. I hope somebody knows of a good job for an ex-Navigation Officer dismissed the Service with ignominy at the tender age of thirty-five.

You'll have read the reports of the Space Murder Trial, as the newspapers called it, so I won't go into that in any detail. I had to give evidence, you remember, as I was the only person on Ariachne One besides Alan Carson and Eric Binstead at the time of Binstead's death. But I didn't get much chance to tell my own tale in my own way, so I'm going to do that now. I think it ought to start about three years before the actual cruise on which Binstead died; that is, at the time when Alan Carson got married. He asked me to be his Best Man, which suited me well enough, though I can't say I ever liked Sheila very much—

she seemed to me to be more out for the glamour of marrying a Spacer than anything else. Funny how the glamour sticks—you'd think people would realise that it's ninety per cent boredom and ten per cent sheer terror as far as we're concerned.

Still, Sheila seemed to think she'd got quite a catch, and Alan took a year's ground-duty, then went on a couple of short tours of six months each, with three months ground-duty between,

which is the usual routine.

It was during the second of these tours that Sheila went off with Binstead, and Alan took it very hard indeed. He'd always been a gregarious sort of chap before, but now he just refused to be pally with anyone. I think he hit the bottle a bit, too—in private, which makes it worse. And after one more short cruise, he asked to go on a deep-space reconnaissance—a two year trip. By this time, of course, Sheila Carson and Eric Binstead had split up, and the grape-vine told me that Sheila had asked Alan to take her back, but he'd refused point blank.

If this was true, I can't say I blamed him, but as I've said, I never really liked Sheila, so maybe I'm biased. Anyway, Alan embarked on the Galactic Survey Ship *Artemis*, under Captain Vincent Wells-Tryner, D.S.O., S.E.S., as Junior Geologist, with an older scientist called Gil Merrick as Senior Geologist, and I was along as Navigation Officer. And, as you know, Eric

Binstead was Senior Biologist.

Now I've done several tours of various lengths with Wells-Tryner, and I don't find him a bad Captain in the usual way. Admittedly, he regards people as machines for operating spaceships, but he treats himself in precisely the same way, so that you do at least know exactly where you stand withh im. But this didn't seem to me to be the sort of situation a man like Wells-Tryner ought to be in control of—after all, cogs in a machine tend not to seduce each other's wives—and as second-in-command of the ship I felt I ought to take the matter up with the Old Man.

He was quite prickly about it.

"Mister Jensen," he said, "of course I know the story of Carson's matrimonial troubles. They have nothing to do with this mission. Carson and Binstead are employed on this cruise as officers of the Space Exploration Service, and I expect them to conduct themselves as such, and not to behave like spoilt children. I trust that is clear to you, and also to them. If not, you may ask them to explain their difficulties to me."

Well, you don't argue with Wells-Tryner when he's in his Dedicated Spacer mood, so I just took Alan aside and asked him to watch his step. He seemed prepared to be reasonable, though with the withdrawn attitude he'd adopted recently it was difficult to tell just what he was thinking. I didn't talk to Binstead, because I never could stand the sight of him, and I wasn't alone in that. Quite apart from Alan Carson, I can't think of anyone else in the Service, either, who shed any tears over his untimely demise.

However, I wasn't too worried, because Artemis is a big ship, so Alan and Binstead could easily keep out of each other's way, and the actual planet-falls would be made by Merrick, Binstead, and myself, so there didn't seem much chance of the two of them

being thrown too much together.

The first half of the cruise passed off without incident. Merrick, Binstead, and I called on about a dozen planets, and found practically nothing of interest. Binstead collected some furry animals rather like rats from one system, and got quite excited because they seemed to exist without either breathing the nasty sulphurous atmosphere of their home planet, or eating its disgusting yellow mosses, but apart from that it was a typically tedious assignment.

Then, when we were two days out from a Group G star system called Ariachne, which was next on our list, Gil Merrick managed to break his ankle, and put himself out of commission for the next couple of weeks. This was just the sort of thing I'd been afraid of all along. Normally, it wouldn't have upset the schedule much, because Merrick's junior—Alan Carson—would have taken over from him for the surveys, and Merrick would have stayed in the ship and done the lab work usually reserved to the Junior Officer.

But for us it meant that Carson would have to go out with Binstead, and although I would be along as usual to see that they didn't lose themselves, it still seemed to me like asking for trouble. So I asked the Old Man whether we ought not to delay things until Merrick recovered, or at any rate send out Binstead's Junior on this particular survey. This time he was even more prickly about it.

"Mister Jensen," he said (there's always something nasty on the way when he calls you "Mister") "Standing Orders are perfectly clear on this point. Initial surveys are to be carried out by the Senior Geologist and the Senior Biologist, accom-

panied by the Ship's Navigation Officer. In the case of incapacity, any member of the team may be replaced by his second man. Binstead is perfectly fit. I do not propose asking him to stand down, nor will I permit him to do so." And more of the same. Then he had Alan Carson and Binstead in, and dressed the three of us down thoroughly, until we all felt pretty small. I think. I know I did.

So when we reached the Ariachne system, it was Carson, Binstead and myself who climbed into the scout to make planet-fall on the outermost planet of the sun's three satellites, which was recorded romantically as Ariachne One. Artemis' instruments had indicated an atmosphere quite close to earth normal, apart from an almost complete absence of watervapour or surface moisture, a little plant life, no sentient life whatsoever, and a topography of various minerals including quite a large percentage of lead, and a number of unclassified metals. Altogether, a harmless looking sort of place, with fairly encouraging mining possibilities. There was a pretty high average surface temperature, but it was by no means high enough to be inconvenient.

We set up camp towards the Eastern edge of a broad plain, about half a mile from some steep cliffs which marked the Western front of a range of mountains stretching for some hundreds of miles Eastwards. Binstead and Carson took up their equipment and set off to do some preliminary experiments. while I organised the camp for a five-day stay and got in touch with Artemis.

The scientists had been gone barely half an hour when Carson appeared at the door of the tent looking as white as his own ghost, and holding his side-weapon in his hand. There was the lheavy, pungent smell of scorched metal you get when one of those things has been discharged, and Alan himself was clearly in a bad way.
"Mike!" he panted. "Call up the ship. Binstead's dead.

There's someone shooting at us !"

I grabbed my hand-gun and ran out of the tent with Alan. The landscape looked just as innocuous as when we arrived.

"Over there," said Alan, pointing towards the cliffs. saw the flash as Binstead went down, and let a charge off at it. I couldn't see anything moving, but he's dead enough. Half his head burnt off."

We'd no way of knowing what strength there was out against us, of course, and two men with only side-arms can't indulge in much in the way of warfare, so we abandoned the camp and took the scout up again just as fast as maybe, and called up Artemis from there.

Naturally, there was an enquiry back aboard the ship. But it brought out only two facts. One: they'd picked up some high radiation at about the time when Alan discharged his weapon, but no indications of any other firing, and two: the ship's sentiometers insisted throughout that there'd been no animal life on the planet whatsoever apart from ourselves, and the machines are geared not to record the patterns of members of the crew, so no-one knew of Binstead's death until we told them.

After that, the Old Man decided to recover the body and have a good look round Ariachne One. All the scouts went out—I was in command of one of them myself—and this time they weren't full of exploration gear, they were armed and dangerous. But there was nothing to shoot at. No trace of life anywhere, and, oddest of all, no radiation scars on the cliffs where Alan said he'd discharged his weapon towards them.

The surgeon examined Binstead's body and said he appeared to have been shot by a radiation gun from fairly close range, as there was no sign of the "scatter" you get with the radiations from all but the heaviest types of electron guns. And

with that we had to be temporarily content.

Back aboard Artemis, the Old Man called Alan up, and told me as second-in-command to sit in on the interview. He plugged Alan pretty hard about just what happened, but he stuck to his story then, as he did all through the trial and afterwards. He and Binstead were setting up their equipment about a quarter of a mile from the cliff when Alan saw a flash from the base of the cliff, and Binstead spun round with his head scorched just at the same moment. Alan discharged his gun at the flash almost before Binstead hit the ground, and then sprinted back to the camp to get me.

Wells-Tryner looked searchingly at Alan for several seconds, and tapped his bony fingers thoughtfully on the desk.

"You had no cause to care for Binstead, I believe?" he

asked.

Alan went white. I don't think it's surprising that he was upset enough to speak as he did to the Old Man, though so far as I know no-one's ever spoken to him like it before, or since either.

"Care for him?" he almost shouted. "I hated his guts. How would you like it if some bastard stole your wife?"

"Rather better than you'll like the Termination Chamber, I fancy," replied the Old Man. Strangely enough, it was only then that I realised how bad things looked for Alan.

The rest of the cruise was cancelled, and we returned to Earth, where Alan was charged with the culpable homicide of Eric Ramsbury Binstead, and in due course came to trial.

Most of the trial is a bit blurred in my memory. I know that when the judge began his final speech to the jury I quite thought Alan would get an acquittal. There was a great deal about what the judge called the Burden of Proof, which he said was on the prosecution throughout. It had to be proved not only that Alan could have killed Binstead, not only that he had the opportunity, not only that he may have had reason to hate him, but that it was beyond doubt that the shot which killed Binstead was deliberately fired by Alan Carson.

But when it came to reviewing the evidence against Alan, even I had to admit it looked pretty damning, though I found it very hard to believe that he would have killed even a snake

like Binstead in cold blood.

However, the evidence was clear; the ballistics men all agreed that any ionizing weapon except the heaviest ship-borne artillery showed distinct traces of "scatter" over any range greater than about a hundred yards, the medics said that there was no sign of "scatter" about Binstead's wound, Alan's side-arm had been discharged once only, and there was also the evidence, reluctant though it was, of the ship's crew. This proved that there was no indication of any ionizing discharge in the vicinity of the cliffs Alan said he'd fired at and that there was no trace of life on the planet, either from the sentiometers, which had been checked for accuracy, or from the search which was made when Binstead's body was collected.

Another thing I remember the judge saying was that if the jury didn't think Carson did kill Binstead, it was no part of their duty to say who did, but all the same I'd say they'd have been more than human if they hadn't followed that line of thought—it would have been fairly conclusive to me, I know,

if I hadn't known Alan better. After all, if he didn't kill Binstead, who did? At any rate, the jury said Alan was guilty,

his appeal failed, and he was executed as a murderer.

I suppose the Space Murder Trial was a bit of a seven-days' wonder on Earth. But Alan Carson and Eric Binstead had both been pretty well known in the Service, and I doubt if there was a single Spacer, apart from Wells-Tryner, who really thought that Alan was a murderer, or that if he was, the whole story had come out. Besides that, Spacers are a bit superstitious about the funny things that happen in the far deeps, and I somehow knew that there was more to the business than met the eye. I also had a feeling that there might still be more of the answer to be found on Ariachne One, so when Wells-Tryner mounted a new expedition on Artemis to complete the unfinished survey there, I got myself posted as Navigation Officer again.

This time the senior scientific officers were two youngish men called Merrivale and Grenning. Merrick was the geologist, and I happened to be with him when he got his first test bore down into the planet's crust. I suppose that what he discovered then should have given the game away—the centre of the planet was much hotter than the external observations had led us to think, and the crust consisted almost entirely of an ore assaying at about sixty per cent lead and thirty per cent other unclassified minerals, the last ten per cent being rubbish and trace elements of various sorts. The ore was virtually impervious to radioactivity.

But it was on the third evening of the survey, just as it was getting dark, that we got our best clue. We all saw a flash from about half-way up the cliff that Alan said he'd shot at, and the local radioactivity shot up momentarily by about a

thousand per cent.

After that it didn't take us long to discover what happened

to Binstead.

The interior of Ariachne One is an absolute furnace of nuclear reaction. But the crust of the planet is such an excellent shield that none of the radiation escapes in the form of scattered heat, which explains another little mystery that noone had bothered much about before—why the planet's surface temperature was about four degrees higher than its mass, speed of rotation, and distance from its sun said it should be.

But the surface shield isn't infallible. It's in two layers—the outer, solid, stratum, and an inner stratum of the same material in a fluid form. In that state, it isn't impervious to radiation. It's only on contact with the atmosphere, when it solidifies immediately, that it becomes radiation-proof. So that when you get a rock-fault in the solid crust, the fluid stratum forces its way through to the surface, and in so doing releases a heavy charge of highly accelerated electrons.

It's an instantaneous release, of course, because as soon as the fluid material comes into contact with the atmosphere it solidifies and re-seals the surface. And the shielding given by the solidified material is efficient enough to ensure that the electron beams are to all intents and purposes parallel, and hence the effect on Binstead, who'd happened to get in the way of one of the discharges, of having been shot from close range by an electron gun—you'd have to be about five miles from an Ariachne One discharge before you would detect any noticeable "scatter." And, besides, Alan's shot at the cliff just didn't even mark it.

Well, that's the story. It's been classified whilst the powers that be decide what to do with it, and, presumably, what to do about Alan Carson. And everyone on the second Ariachne survey has been ordered to keep quiet meanwhile. But I don't see why all the people who knew and admired Alan Carson should have to wait several years for the red tape to get itself untied—if it ever does. They never really thought Alan just took it into his head to kill Binstead, however well the State discharged its burden of proof, and I can tell them now that they're quite right, he didn't. I can also tell them who did. Eric Binstead was murdered by a planet called Ariachne One.

Like I said, I hope someone knows of a good job for an ex-Navigation Officer dismissed the Space Exploration Service with ignominy at the tender age of thirty-five.

David Jay



Levans' job was to keep the crashed survivors alive on the alien planet under the most exacting circumstances. Without food or water this was a tremendous task—until he found the statue.

THE STATUE by R. W. MACKELWORTH

Dust. Levans was conscious of dust, in his suit and in his hair. It made a cracked pancake where it had mixed with the sweat and dried. It clogged his eyes so that he found it hard to see, his nose so that each breath irritated his mouth until he choked.

Desperately he pushed himself up from the ground supporting his body with his flattened hands. He coughed again and again.

For a moment his body was full of live physical fear but

in his mind was the cold urge to survive.

He had been trained to survive. It was more than the prime instinct, it was an overriding demand. Yet the urge was not merely selfish, because he was the key to the lock, the centre of the team. Without him the whole venture failed and there was no sentiment in it.

The coughing subsided and gradually he was able to relax. He willed himself to calmness and felt the satisfying blanket of self-control put out the fire of panic, which had

nearly overwhelmed him.

He rubbed his eyes and looked around him.

There were three figures on the ground with him. Two moved slightly as if toying with a return to life, but the

other lay still, very still. He counted them mentally, tagging

them with names and personalities.

There was Jordan, the big man, his great energy temporarily eclipsed. Levans was fervently relieved to see that he was still fighting even in the fogs of semi-consciousness. He relied for something personal in the simple attitude of the engineer, which warmed the coldness of his own mind.

Next to Jordan lay Rudd. He was stirring slightly and moaning, stretched out to the full extent of his long thin body in the dust. The bulk of Jordan's body made him seem even more elongated, but he was tough, perhaps with

the greatest endurance of them all.

Then there was Trudi Peters but she was still completely out. She lay like a bundle of discarded rags, her knees drawn up to her chest and her arms outstretched. He felt an illogical sense of loss. Despite her pale, plain face and the masculine preciseness of her mind, she had many times proved her value with the extra intuition that women sometimes have.

She looked dead, but he reprimanded himself for presuming her so. He had to live by facts and he could not afford to presume. She might still be alive and an asset not to be unnecessarily disposed of.

The fourth figure should not have been there. It stood etched against the blue-black sky, immobile and without living personality. He saw it with the shock of an unexpected revelation and for a second or so he tried to reject its existence. His mind started to grope with the problem of its presence and his thoughts probed for the aura that might have clung to it. The Statue should not have been there, but it was and it held what secrets it had.

Angrily he put it out of his mind and sharply disengaged it from his topmost thoughts. If an angel had stood there, he would have done the same. The most important call on

him was the needs of his team.

He dragged himself forward and as he did so he realised for the first time that none of them was wearing helmets. This was stunning, and he felt the chilly surge of fear once again. It was as ridiculous as the predicament of a man afloat, who suddenly discovered he had lost his lifejacket and yet still lived. Where there should be no air there was air, thin and difficult to breath, but nevertheless air.

He accepted the fact as strange but real and therefore

valuable and went on with his job.

He fumbled for his medical kit, then returned the syringe almost as soon as he found it. Instead he lightly ran his hand over Jordan's face and spoke to him softly, almost crooning like a mother with her child. Jordan opened his eyes.

Levans wasted no time but left him for Rudd. It was not necessary to do anything for him. He was awake, like someone who had just left behind a long and comfortable sleep, lying with eyes open, calmly resting. He smiled at Levans

and shook his head.

"Sorry to be idle. I was obeying your orders."

Levans looked down at him intently. "Did you see Jordan come round?"

" No."

Levans smiled faintly as if pleased with the answer. "It's all right, there is air, but you were right to be cautious."

In the case of a helmet leak or when a man was caught either in a thin or non-existent atmosphere unexpectedly, he was supposed to lie absolutely still in the hope that he could be saved in the few available minutes before death. Movement used up oxygen and it was essential to live to the last drop. Levans was pleased with Rudd's care but it was what he should have expected of the man.

He motioned Rudd to follow him.

Trudi lay near the base of the Statue. The attitude of her body was oddly like that of a supplicant fallen from a kneeling position, on to her side. Rudd must have noticed this strange relationship for his eyes narrowed as he contemplated the Statue. A definite look of resentment darkened his face as if the inanimate thing had struck her down like some old and vicious god.

Levans did not miss the strength of Rudd's reaction or the shadow which passed over his face and he marked it

down for future reference.

The girl was alive, her pulse murmuring the message

faintly.

He nodded to Rudd. "Give her a sedative. It's better to let her recover slowly." He thought to himself that it was also better to keep Trudi and her intuition out of the way for a while.

Jordan, his deep voice muted, called softly to them. "What the hell is that thing. I don't like the look of it."

Levans was going to ignore the question but it gave him a germ of an idea which he wanted to think about. He also realised that the big man was still confused and the change in immediate environment from the ship and its protecting scientific machinery to this place was a shock to his straightforward mind. He was confused about the actual circumstances himself and he puzzled over his own lapse of memory.

He recalled the last orbit and remembered reading the pattern of shifting signals on the consul and reporting to the others that something was wrong. After that he remembered nothing. He was tempted to ask Rudd but he didn't dare. It was easy to start a panic and hard to stop it.

Jordan repeated his question, a hint of hysteria in his voice, and Levans was compelled to answer. "It's interesting, isn't it? We will examine it in detail in a moment. Perhaps we will have a sensational piece of evidence to take home with us." He had measured the impact of his words carefully and saw that his hopeful propaganda had a calming effect on Jordan.

He switched his mind back to the problem of survival.

They were in a saucer-shaped depression about thirty feet deep. It was a wide dust bowl and the dry red stuff covered everything. Along the rim of the depression however was a thick, man-high line of packed vegetation. It looked very like a type of Martian cacti with which he was familiar. If that was so, there was just a chance that man could live a kind of borderline existence until he reached a higher level of science, which enabled him to provide the amenities of normal life. He did not expect his shipwrecked crew would think it reasonable unless they had no alternative; but somehow he had to convince them the effort was worthwhile and that it was a matter of the spirit as much as sheer endurance.

He noticed the marks made by their erratic footsteps from the edge of the cactus line. There was a deeper mark in the dust also as if they had dragged someone with them. He thought it might be Trudi.

He followed the imprints back to the edge of the vegetation with his eyes again and saw the escape capsule. It was

split open, obviously by the force of impact.

So they had successfully launched the capsule but why could he not remember the details? It was feasible that he allowed himself to slip into unconsciousness, despite his training, before he had a chance to swallow an oxygen pill, but what a terrible error. When the emergency had come, despite some warning, he had failed to react correctly—he who had been chosen from hundreds to lead this team.

He returned his wandering attention to Rudd. "At least

we won't have to live on oxygen pills."

Rudd looked at him with some astonishment. "We left

them in the capsule."

Levans felt a spasm of anger. "You left them in the capsule? What would have happened if there had been no air here? Without the pills we would have been dead. Five years supply of oxygen in the capsule and we ran out into a supposedly airless world like scared children."

Rudd looked apologetic and a little hurt. "I was unconscious from the time the emergency lights flashed in the

ship."

Levans shrugged his shoulders in a way he had when he was upset. "Someone must have been awake, but as I was probably conscious as well, I'm as guilty as you are. If you feel up to it, I think we should return to the capsule and see if there is anything else we overlooked. As there is air here we can count ourselves lucky on that score, but we may need some of the other stuff." He wanted to retain an air of normality and he realised that action was the best way to do it. He had been near to revealing both error and weakness to Rudd and he had to make up lost ground.

Rudd made no protest nor gave any sign that he had lost any faith in his leader and indeed seemed glad of the

excuse to do something.

They both stood upright for the first time, a little self-consciously, like men who had expected gunfire which had never come. It was noticeably harder to breath standing up and when they walked it was as if they had a great weight on their chests.

It became apparent after a few steps that to climb the rise to the capsule was beyond them. The air became thinner with every step.

Levans took Rudd's arm and indicated that they must give up. He was unable to talk and Rudd seemed incapable

of speech either. Together they staggered down the incline and collapsed exhausted at the foot of the Statue.

Jordan had been watching their attempt and return with increasing concern. "What went wrong?" The taint of hysteria had returned to his voice.

Levans was unable to reply and merely shook his head. Finally he made a great effort to restore his breathing and

stood up again.

He was sure that example was the best palliative. He could only hope that Jordan would produce the cure for his own fear from inside himself, in time. All he could do, short of taking full control of the man's mind, was to give him an occasional touch of the spur. He wanted Jordan intact as a personality, because he was the only one he felt real affection for and he needed that affection.

He walked over to the Statue and stood in front of it studying every line and feature, carefully looking for the element that had stirred up the fear in the others. His pose was a little defiant because he felt that this might help to build the illusion he was seeking. He knew they wouldn't

miss his attitude, he could feel their eves on him.

The Statue was definitely human in shape, with arms and legs in every way normal, on an upright torso. Its head was erect, almost proudly so and the face possessed a wide mouth, curved slightly in a smile, under a nose of unusual length. The eyes were closed and the whole face gave an impression of impassive indifference beneath a condescending humour, like an implied threat. Levans began to understand the men's emotional response a bit better. Whatever the Statue represented wasn't nice to know.

They joined him one on either side. He observed their different approach to the unknown with interest. Jordan was relaxed now, but awed while Rudd was as tense as a bowstring.

"Why don't you try to call the ship down to us?"

Levans had been waiting for this question and he didn't blame Rudd for asking it. He gave him a sidelong glance careful to control his emotions. "I can't, my powers are limited. I have to be in direct contact with the consul controls. You know I'm not a telepath, they were wiped out to a man by our more lethal ancestors."

Rudd looked bitter. "I'm not so sure of that, there seems to be a logical connection in my mind between telepathy and your ability. In any case we can't survive here indefinitely. What do we eat and drink?"

"Can't you do that trick with the appearing eggs?"

Jordan spoke eagerly remembering a night at a party on

Earth.

Levans was tempted but he put it from him. It was too risky. "It was just a trick." He managed to convey a certain reluctant helplessness.

"In that case we are doomed to die on this damned

planet."

Levans sought to distract them from Rudd's resentful words. "This Statue is obviously the remnant of an old civilisation and I should think that it holds out some hope for us. Look, it has a carved bowl in one hand, some indication that hospitality existed here once."

"Yes, and it has a baton like the corrective cane of an officer too." Rudd kicked at the base of the Statue. "There's

no good in that thing."

Comparing them both Levans never ceased to wonder at their inherent differences. Jordan, big and good humoured, his face rugged and down-to-earth, yet still distinctly handsome, reminded him of the jovial, football playing giants he had known and admired back at home, handy with a

scrum or a pint of beer and entirely extrovert.

Rudd on the other hand was a man whose being resided entirely inside himself and like an introvert melody was utterly contained by the instrument of his calling. He displayed his genius for the popular gaze only rarely, but there was a beauty about the careful logic of his mind that had made him one of the greatest composite scientists ever. He could be appreciated only by someone willing to overlook his cold singleminded personality and his pressing cynicism. That someone could be Trudi Peters, he thought, with a sense of incongruity. To judge by Rudd's reaction to the Statue when they had been treating Trudi, he might have more than a passing fancy for the plain biologist too. It was another master card in his hand.

As for himself, he knew he was the flex that fused them together and more by the peculiar ability in him than his own personality.

He had to admit to himself that he was a freak, a convenient freak with a power that would have seen him burned at a stake in earlier times and placed him in grave danger even now. His mind was rather like a hand which is double jointed; its use had to be related to some unusual need before it could be accepted as normal by ordinary people and any more than a circus trick. Even then most of its power had to be hidden from the frightened minds of the stupid or scared.

He wasn't the first with the ability to use mental power directly on inanimate objects or indeed people. There was a long line of spiritual ancestors from whom he could claim descent. Hypnotists, rain makers and levitation fakirs in a long line clear back to the Pyramids had the same thing in

common with him.

When they discovered the space warp they also discovered that only the finest electronic machine created—the human brain—could operate the subtle, fragile, shift in the time structure accurately. They sought out his kind and they became the new astronauts, those who could leap a space-ship to the stars.

All he needed was a box of electronic tricks to respond to the careful, logical, probing of his mind and he could perform this trick which made him one of mankind's most valuable children. In that context he was safe, the rest of

his power was locked away.

He stopped musing because he was conscious of thirst. The dryness in his throat which had been an annoyance was now becoming serious. They had no water with them nor could he allow them to lay too long in the heat of a planet, which although fortunately further from its sun, still had a resemblance to Mars at its dry, damnable worst.

Rudd endorsed his thoughts. "We are going to be very thirsty before long. Air isn't the only problem on this planet. In fact if it wasn't for that cacti up there I would say that it could be written off as uninhabitable. If we get back to the ship we will have to tell Earth the survey shows a failure, whatever their problems are."

Levans puckered up his face. It was more than ever like a pixie's when he did so. He was not aware that his small wizened face and dwarf-like body were open to ridicule and no one in their right mind or an inch above ignorance would have mentioned it. He had too much presence. How-

ever, the comparison was hard to avoid.

"To be truthful I think the increase in the sun's heat will make it uncomfortable for us at midday and we will have to pray for some unlooked-for factor in the situation to survive. I don't think that this depression is an accident though, it's too regular. The old inhabitants faced the problem of survival under these conditions and this place and the Statue may have been some kind of answer." Levans allowed this statement to sink into the minds of the others and was pleased to see them looking at the Statue with new interest.

"There is air and water here or the cacti could not live so profusely. I think that they release the oxygen from the soil." Rudd's intense face did not give any great sign that he was grappling with the question but they could almost feel the mental thrust of his thinking. "Perhaps the Statue represents some method they had of obtaining the needs of life, like a Fertility God. It's all beyond me."

Thirst was no mean enemy. With the increase in heat the pangs began to sap their strength rapidly and they lay around the Statue exhausted by the effort to remain alive.

Levans knew that he had to wait for the right moment; the point of despair. It came when Jordan suffering the most because of his great body with its big appetite began to whimper a little and Rudd unnerved by the sound screamed at him to be quiet.

Levans began to think of water. The thought tortured him but he persisted. He imagined it clear and sweet, with

the entire power of his mind.

He was asking much in such an atmosphere but he remembered all those like him who had tried this on Earth and sometimes died for their knowledge.

The minutes passed and he started to despair and with a renewed effort growing with his fear he concentrated on the bowl in the Statue's hand. He willed it to be full, waiting for the sudden feeling of fulfilment that meant he had succeeded. If he could conquer the process here, he had not only achieved their survival but he would be able with luck to retain the basic unity of the team, while he carried through the ordained plan.

Then he heard Jordan's voice. It was cracked but full of an unrestrained joy.

"I smell water!"

He felt an utter weariness drain from his body and a feeling of unimaginable triumph as he heard the cry. He dragged himself to the Statue and pulled himself up to the level of the bowl. The shallow vessel was full to the brim.

They moistened their lips and gave vent to their joy in a way that people who had not thirsted to near-death could understand. In time they even remembered Trudi and moistened her lips with a wet rag, then forced the water between her lips.

To Levans' astonishment the cup was still full when they were finished. He knew that he was not still consciously using his will and it made him curious about the extent of

his power.

He spoke on an impulse but he still had the final point of his plans in his mind. "Rudd, are you hungry?"

"Yes."

"I have a theory about this Statue which so conveniently produces water when we are thirsty. Concentrate your thoughts on the desire for food. Think of its smell and its taste. Will it to come."

Rudd wanted to refuse. His mind was too fastidious to consent to the illogical act involved. He looked at Jordan

hopefully.

The big man wanted to try. It was the kind of parlour trick he liked to see Levans do and he wanted in his simple

way to be something more than an engineer.

Levans shook his head. "No. It must be you, Rudd. It needs your clarity of thought to approach the craving we had for water."

Rudd faced the Statue, contempt on his face and stared at it. He seem to be trying to match the cold antagonism of the Statue's leering smile. He concentrated fiercely as if to make the stone back away from him in defeat.

The water darkened slowly, thickening as they watched, until a black solid filled the bowl. They remained silent and as if by mutual consent, like children awed by a conjuring trick, they turned away looking at each other with wonder.

·Rudd shook his head. "I had a terrible impression while I was concentrating on that Statue, that it wanted something

of me in return. I felt this tremendous urge for power and

I sensed danger in asking it for anything."

Trudi's sharp incisive voice called from the ground where she was lying. Her face was screwed up with the outward sign of some terrible pain or anguish. Her words came as if punctured with too much care and seemed to hang in the air between them.

"Do you know what you have been playing with?"

Levans nodded his head and showed no hint of surprise at her question. She was the one he found hardest to control but he knew her value and treated her carefully and with respect.

"It's some kind of robot, I think."

"You're damned right it is and a very nasty-minded one at that. It's a good job that it wasn't given more time to work

on you."

Levans was very pleased at the way things were going. He thought it was true that if you wanted to rule you must first find something for the people to hate. "Did you get some

impression from the Statue then?"

"I was half conscious and I turned my head towards you as you all stood in front of the horror. It was as though I could read a human mind. There was a jumble about some old people who had made a perfect robot which fed them and cared for them. They were completely dependent on it. Then one day it started to rationalise its service into a question of power. It refused to feed the people and watched them die. It was horrible."

"Did it say what it wanted from us?"

"Yes it did." Trudi's face was drawn with unhappiness. "It gave me the impression that it could recall the ship and bring it down here, if we gave it the instructions for doing so."

"With what object?"

"It sounds ridiculous but it wants to force us to take it back to Earth, where it can start all over again." She hesitated. "I think it has power mania."

Levans pondered a second, "Do you know what went

wrong with the ship, Trudi?"

"Yes and so does Jordan. The mixture control broke down and we all got an overdose of oxygen. You bundled us into the escape capsule and we crashed in spite of the 'fail safe' system in it. It was just as if we were drunk. You and Rudd passed out. Jordan and I dragged you down here, then the shock caused by the sudden drop in oxygen knocked us out too."

Levans looked at Jordan. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"You didn't ask me and I thought you knew, as you always seem to." Jordan's voice was sad as if he had failed.

"Quite frankly I thought you acted rather prematurely in the ship, pushing us out like that." Trudi's tone was slightly suspicious. "We should have had a go at repairing the mixture control first."

Levans thought quickly. "It was too risky in close orbit.

We would have crashed."

Rudd saved the moment of strain. "Shall we take a risk

and use that robot to call down the ship?"

"Why not? It's only a lump of stone or metal. I'm sure that we can control any attempt it makes to double-cross us." Levans was probing for the response that he wanted. He looked around at their thoughtful faces. "What about it?"

One by one they shook their heads.

"Then we will have to stay here with little chance of rescue."

Trudi took Rudd's arm. "We will survive and without the help of that thing. Perhaps we can start to revive this planet together. We would be fools, criminal fools, to let that robot find its way to Earth, especially with the troubles there."

"In that case I must bow to the majority." Levans looked slightly disappointed but in his heart he was jubilant. He looked at the Statue and smiled. "You should learn the

value of service, my friend."

The air was beginning to thicken as the night drew on and they were able to reach the edge of the vegetation and the escape capsule. It was apparent that the cacti worked at its task of releasing the air from the soil better when the sun had gone.

Levans was appreciating the joy of complete vindication and success. He had hated the faked accident and the deceit that it involved, but what he had managed with an old and useless stone statue took the edge off the task he had been

given on Earth.

It had sounded so simple when they gave the orders. It was imperative to find inhabitable worlds for the throngs of

Earth, and to do that with so few ships available at present called for sacrifices. Pioneer teams had to be landed and start their work at once and with the right spirit, so that when they sent out the mass-produced space vehicles packed with their unwilling masses, there would be some measure of preparation by first-class brains on the receiving planets.

There were very few men willing to take on the task and the simple expedient of inducing fine men and women to carry out a survey was suggested, a survey that would leave them stranded on a strange planet. The deception to be effective needed one more ingredient; a man who could also induce the teams to stay and fight when they would rather return home or sink in the mire of homesickness and resentment

Levans knew he had achieved this object in the very best way and there was pleasure in that for a small man. Trudi might suspect him but she was happy to have Rudd available far away from the temptations of Earth and she would remain his ally. He was a little concerned at her comments on his mind but perhaps he had pushed the pseudo-impressions from the Statue too hard.

All his life he had had to find Statues or their like to operate his power through and take the odium arising from his power and he knew he would have to find more Statues

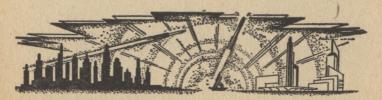
for the future.

Now, however, he had but one more immediate task left. That was to order the spaceship to return to Earth where

she was sorely needed.

He stole away while they were exploring the contents of the capsule and turned his mind out to the stars. He did not see Trudi smiling at him in a quizzical and understanding manner but he would have been happy if he had. It would have helped him to be a little less afraid.

R. W. Mackelworth.



The street signs were 'something to do with the airport,' but Hathaway had an obsession about them. He was convinced that they were a last ditch defence of an over-industrialised civilisation

The Subliminal Man

by J. G. BALLARD

"The signs, Doctor! Have you seen the signs?"

Frowning with annoyance, Dr. Franklin quickened his pace and hurried down the hospital steps towards the line of parked cars. Over his shoulder he caught a glimpse of a thin, scruffy young man in ragged sandals and lime-stained jeans waving to him from the far side of the drive, then break into a run when he saw Franklin try to evade him.

"Dr. Franklin! The signs!"

Head down, Franklin swerved around an elderly couple approaching the out-patients department. His car was over a hundred yards away. Too tired to start running himself, he waited for the young man to catch him up.

"All right, Hathaway, what is it this time?" he snapped irritably. "I'm getting sick of you hanging around here all

day."

Hathaway lurched to a halt in front of him, uncut black hair like an awning over his eyes. He brushed it back with a claw-like hand and turned on a wild smile, obviously glad to see Franklin and oblivious of the latter's hostility.

"I've been trying to reach you at night, Doctor, but your wife always puts the phone down on me," he explained

without a hint of rancour, as if well-used to this kind of snub. "And I didn't want to look for you inside the Clinic." They were standing by a privet hedge that shielded them from the lower windows of the main administrative block, but Franklin's regular rendezvous with Hathaway and his strange messianic cries had already been the subject of amused comment.

Franklin began to say: "I appreciate that—" but Hathaway

Franklin began to say: "I appreciate that—" but Hathaway brushed this aside. "Forget it, Doctor, there are more important things happening now. They've started to build the first big signs! Over a hundred feet high, on the traffic islands just outside town. They'll soon have all the approach roads covered. When they do we might as well stop thinking."

"Your trouble is that you're thinking too much," Franklin told him. "You've been rambling about these signs for weeks

now. Tell me, have you actually seen one signalling?"

Hathaway tore a handful of leaves from the hedge, exasperated by this irrelevancy. "Of course I haven't, that's the whole point, Doctor." He dropped his voice as a group of nurses walked past, watching him uneasily out of the corners of their eyes. "The construction gangs were out again last night, laying huge power cables. You'll see them on the way home. Everything's nearly ready now."

"They're traffic signs," Franklin explained patiently. "The flyover has just been completed. Hathaway, for God's sake

relax. Try to think of Dora and the child."

"I am thinking of them!" Hathaway's voice rose to a controlled scream. "Those cables were 40,000-volt lines, Doctor, with terrific switch-gear. The trucks were loaded with enormous metal scaffolds. Tomorrow they'll start lifting them up all over the city, they'll block off half the sky! What do you think Dora will be like after six months of that? We've got to stop them, Doctor, they're trying to transistorise our brains!"

Embarrassed by Hathaway's high-pitched shouting, Franklin had momentarily lost his sense of direction and helplessly searched the sea of cars for his own. "Hathaway, I can't waste any more time talking to you. Believe me, you need skilled help, these obsessions are beginning to master you."

Hathaway started to protest, and Franklin raised his right hand firmly. "Listen. For the last time, if you can show me one of these new signs, and prove that it's transmitting sub liminal commands, I'll go to the police with you. But you haven't got a shred of evidence, and you know it. Subliminal advertising was banned thirty years ago, and the laws have never been repealed. Anyway, the technique was unsatisfactory, any success it had was marginal. Your idea of a huge conspiracy with all these thousands of giant signs everywhere is preposterous."

"All right, Doctor." Hathaway leaned against the bonnet of one of the cars. His moods seemed to switch abruptly from one level to the next. He watched Franklin amiably. "What's the matter—lost your car?"

"All your damned shouting has confused me." Franklin pulled out his ignition key and read the number off the tag:

"NYN 299-566-367-21—can you see it?"

Hathaway leaned around lazily, one sandal up on the bonnet, surveying the square of a thousand or so cars facing them. "Difficult, isn't it, when they're all identical, even the same colour? Thirty years ago there were about ten different makes, each in a dozen colours."

Franklin spotted his car, began to walk towards it. "Sixty years ago there were a hundred makes. What of it? The economies of standardisation are obviously bought at a price."

Hathaway drummed his palm lightly on the roofs. "But these cars aren't all that cheap, Doctor. In fact, comparing them on an average income basis with those of thirty years ago they're about forty per cent more expensive. With only one make being produced you'd expect a substantial reduction in price, not an increase."

"Maybe," Franklin said, opening his door. "But mechanically the cars of today are far more sophisticated. They're

lighter, more durable, safer to drive."

Hathaway shook his head sceptically. "They bore me. The same model, same styling, same colour, year after year. It's a sort of communism." He rubbed a greasy finger over the windshield. "This is a new one again, isn't it, Doctor? Where's the old one—you only had it for three months?"

"I traded it in," Franklin told him, starting the engine. "If you ever had any money you'd realise that it's the most economical way of owning a car. You don't keep driving the same one until it falls apart. It's the same with everything else—television sets, washing machines, refrigerators. But you aren't faced with the problem—you haven't got any."

Hathaway ignored the gibe, and leaned his elbow on Franklin's window. "Not a bad idea, either, Doctor. It gives me time to think. I'm not working a twelve-hour day to pay for a lot of things I'm too busy to use before they're obselete."

He waved as Franklin reversed the car out of its line, then shouted into the wake of exhaust: "Drive with your eyes closed, Doctor!"

On the way home Franklin kept carefully to the slowest of the four-speed lanes. As usual after his discussions with Hathaway he felt vaguely depressed. He realised that unconsciously he envied Hathaway his footloose existence. Despite the grimy cold-water apartment in the shadow and roar of the flyover, despite his nagging wife and their sick child, and the endless altercations with the landlord and the supermarket credit manager, Hathaway still retained his freedom intact. Spared any responsibilities, he could resist the smallest encroachment upon him by the rest of society, if only by generating obsessive fantasies such as his latest one about subliminal advertising.

The ability to react to stimuli, even irrationally, was a valid criterion of freedom. By contrast, what freedom Franklin possessed was peripheral, sharply demarked by the manifold responsibilities in the centre of his life—the three mortgages on his home, the mandatory rounds of cocktail and TV parties, the private consultancy occupying most of Saturday which paid the instalments on the multitude of household gadgets, clothes and past holidays. About the only time he

had to himself was driving to and from work.

But at least the roads were magnificent. Whatever other criticisms might be levelled at the present society, it certainly knew how to build roads. Eight, ten and twelve-lane expressways interlaced across the continent, plunging from overhead causeways into the giant car parks in the centre of the cities, or dividing into the great suburban arteries with their multi-acre parking aprons around the marketing centres. Together the roadways and car parks covered more than a third of the country's entire area, and in the neighbourhood of the cities the proportion was higher. The old cities were surrounded by the vast, dazzling abstract sculptures of the clover-leaves and fly-overs, but even so the congestion was unremitting.

The ten-mile journey to his home in fact covered over twenty-five miles and took him twice as long as it had done before the construction of the expressway, the additional miles contained within the three giant clover-leaves. New cities were springing from the motels, cafes and car marts around the highways. At the slightest hint of an intersection a shanty town of shacks and filling stations sprawled away among the forest of electric signs and route indicators, many of them substantial cities.

All around him cars bulletted along, streaming towards the suburbs. Relaxed by the smooth motion of the car, Franklin edged outward into the next speed-lane. As he accelerated from 40 to 50 m.p.h. a strident ear-jarring noise drummed out from his tyres, shaking the chassis of the car. Ostensibly an aid to lane discipline, the surface of the road was covered with a mesh of small rubber studs, spaced progressively further apart in each of the lanes so that the tyre hum resonated exactly on 40, 50, 60 and 70 m.p.h. Driving at an intermediate speed for more than a few seconds became physiologically painful, and soon resulted in damage to the car and tyres.

When the studs wore out they were replaced by slightly different patterns, matching those on the latest tyres, so that regular tyre changes were necessary, increasing the safety and efficiency of the expressway. It also increased the revenues of the car and tyre manufacturers, for most cars over six months old soon fell to pieces under the steady battering, but this was regarded as a desirable end, the greater turnover reducing the unit price and making more frequent model changes, as well as

ridding the roads of dangerous vehicles.

A quarter of a mile ahead, at the approach to the first of the clover-leaves, the traffic stream was slowing, huge police signs signalling 'Lanes Closed Ahead' and 'Drop Speed by 10 m.p.h.' Franklin tried to return to the previous lane, but the cars were jammed bumper to bumper. As the chassis began to shudder and vibrate jarring his spine, he clamped his teeth and tried to restrain himself from sounding the horn. Other drivers were less self-controlled and everywhere engines were plunging and snarling, horns blaring. Road taxes were now so high, up to 30% of income (by contrast, income taxes were a bare 2%) that any delay on the expressways called for an immediate government inquiry, and the major departments of state were concerned with the administration of the road systems.

Nearer the clover-leaf the lanes had been closed to allow a gang of construction workers to erect a massive metal sign on one of the traffic islands. The palisaded area swarmed with engineers and surveyors and Franklin assumed that this was the sign Hathaway had seen unloaded the previous night. His apartment was in one of the gimcrack buildings in the settlement that straggled away around a nearby flyover, a low-rent area inhabited by service station personnel, waitresses and other migrant labour.

The sign was enormous, at least 100 feet high, fitted with heavy concave grilles similar to radar bowls. Rooted in a series of concrete caissons, it reared high into the air above the approach roads, visible for miles. Franklin craned up at the grilles, tracing the power cables from the transformers up into the intricate mesh of metal coils that covered their surface. A line of red aircraft-warning beacons was already alight along the top strut, and Franklin assumed that the sign was part of the ground approach system of the city airport ten miles to the east.

Three minutes later, as he accelerated down the two-mile link of straight highway to the next clover-leaf, he saw the second of the giant signs looming up into the sky before him.

Changing down into the 40 m.p.h. lane, Franklin uneasily watched the great bulk of the second sign recede in his rearview mirror. Although there were no graphic symbols among the wire coils covering the grilles, Hathaway's warnings still sounded in his ears. Without knowing why, he felt sure that the signs were not part of the airport approach system. Neither of them was in line with the principal air-lanes. To justify the expense of siting them in the centre of the expressway—the second sign required elaborate angled buttresses to support it on the narrow island—obviously meant that their role related in some way to the traffic streams.

Two hundred yards away was a roadside auto-mart, and Franklin abruptly remembered that he needed some cigarettes. Swinging the car down the entrance ramp, he joined the queue slowly passing the self-service dispenser at the far end of the rank. The auto-mart was packed with cars, each of the five purchasing ranks lined with tired-looking men hunched over

their wheels.

Inserting his coins (paper money was no longer in circulation, unmanagable by the automats) he took a carton from the

dispenser. This was the only brand of cigarettes available in fact there was only one brand of everything —though giant economy packs were an alternative. Moving off, he opened the dashboard locker.

Inside, still sealed in their wrappers, were three other cartons.

A strong fish-like smell pervaded the house when he reached home, steaming out from the oven in the kitchen. Sniffing it uneagerly, Franklin took off his coat and hat, and found his wife crouched over the TV set in the lounge. An announcer was dictating a stream of numbers, and Judith scribbled them down on a pad, occasionally cursing under her breath. "What a muddle!" she snapped finally. "He was talking so quickly I took only a few things down."

"Probably deliberate." Franklin commented. "New panel

game ?"

Judith kissed him on the cheek, discretely hiding the ashtray loaded with cigarette butts and chocolate wrappings. "Hullo, darling, sorry not to have a drink ready for you. They've started this series of Spot Bargains, they give you a selection of things on which you get a ninety per cent trade-in discount at the local stores, if you're in the right area and have the right serial numbers. It's all terribly complicated."

"Sounds good, though. What have you got?"
Judith peered at her checklist. "Well, as far as I can see the only thing is the infra-red barbecue spit. But we have to be there before eight o'clock tonight. It's seven-thirty already."

"Then that's out. I'm tired, angel, I need something to eat." When Judith started to protest he added firmly: "Look, I don't want a new infra-red barbecue spit, we've only had this one for two months. Damn it, it's not even a different model."

"But, darling, don't you see, it makes it cheaper if you keep buying new ones. We'll have to trade ours in at the end of the year anyway, we signed the contract, and this way we save at least twenty dollars. These Spot Bargains aren't just a gimmick, you know. I've been glued to that set all day." A note of irritation had crept into her voice, but Franklin sat his ground, doggedly ignoring the clock.

"Right, we lose twenty dollars. It's worth it." Before she could remonstrate he said: "Judith, please, you probably took the wrong number down anyway." As she shrugged and went over to the bar he called: "Make it a stff one. I see we

have health foods on the menu."

"They're good for you. darling. You know you can't live on ordinary foods all the time. They don't contain any proteins or vitamins. You're always saying we ought to be like people in the old days and eat nothing but health foods."

"I would, but they smell so awful." Franklin lay back, nose in the glass of whisky, gazing at the darkened

skyline outside.

A quarter of a mile away, gleaming out above the roof of the neighbourhood supermarket, were the five red beacon lights. Now and then, as the headlamps of the Spot Bargainers swung up across the face of the building, he could see the square massive bulk of the giant sign clearly silhouetted against the evening sky.

"Judith!" He went into the kitchen and took her over to the window. "That sign, just behind the supermarket. When

did they put it up ?"

"I don't know." Judith peered at him curiously. "Why are you so worried, Robert? Isn't it something to do with the airport?"

Franklin stared thoughtfully at the dark hull of the sign.

"So everyone probably thinks."

Carefully he poured his whisky into the sink.

After parking his car on the supermarket apron at seven o'clock the next morning, Franklin carefully emptied his pockets and stacked the coins in the dashboard locker. The supermarket was already busy with early morning shoppers and the line of thirty turnstiles clicked and slammed. Since the introduction of the '24-hour spending day' the shopping complex was never closed. The bulk of the shoppers were discount buyers, housewives contracted to make huge volume purchases of food, clothing and appliances against substantial overall price cuts, and forced to drive around all day from supermarket to supermarket, frantically trying to keep pace with their purchase schedules and grappling with the added incentives inserted to keep the schemes alive.

Many of the women had teamed up, and as Franklin walked over to the entrance a pack of them charged towards their cars, stuffing their pay slips into their bags and gesticulating at each other. A moment later their cars roared off in a convoy

to the next marketing zone.

A large neon sign over the entrance listed the latest discount—a mere 5%—calculated on the volume of turnover. The

highest discounts, sometimes up to 25%, were earned in the housing estates where junior white-collar workers lived. There, spending had a strong social incentive, and the desire to be the highest spender in the neighbourhood was given moral reinforcement by the system of listing all the names and their accumulating cash totals on a huge electric sign in the supermarket foyers. The higher the spender, the greater his contribution to the discounts enjoyed by others. The lowest spending were regarded as social criminals, free-riding on the backs of others.

Luckily this system had yet to be adopted in Franklin's neighbourhood. Not because the professional men and their wives were able to exercise more discretion, but because their higher incomes allowed them to contract into more expensive discount schemes operated by the big department stores in

the city.

Ten yards from the entrance Franklin paused, looking up at the huge metal sign mounted in an enclosure at the edge of the car park. Unlike the other signs and hoardings that proliferated everywhere, no attempt had been made to decorate it, or disguise the gaunt bare rectangle of rivetted steel mesh. Power lines wound down its sides, and the concrete surface of the car park was crossed by a long scar where a cable had been sunk.

Franklin strolled along, then fifty feet from the sign stopped and turned, realising that he would be late for the hospital and needed a new carton of cigarettes. A dim but powerful humming emanated from the transformers below the sign, fading as

he retraced his steps to the supermarket.

Going over to the automats in the foyer, he felt for his change, then whistled sharply when he remembered why he

had deliberately emptied his pockets.

"The cunning thing!" he said, loud enough for two shoppers to stare at him. Reluctant to look directly at the sign, he watched its reflection in one of the glass door-panes, so that

any subliminal message would be reversed.

Almost certainly he had received two distinct signals—'Keep Away' and 'Buy Cigarettes'. The people who normally parked their cars along the perimeter of the apron were avoiding the area under the enclosure, the cars describing a loose semicircle fifty feet around it.

He turned to the janitor sweeping out the foyer. "What's

that sign for ?"

The man leaned on his broom, gazing dully at the sign. "Dunno," he said, "must be something to do with the airport," He had an almost fresh cigarette in his mouth, but his right hand reached unconsciously to his hip pocket and pulled out a pack. He drummed the second cigarette absently on his thumb-nail as Franklin walked away.

Everyone entering the supermarket was buying cigarettes.

Cruising quietly along the 40 m.p.h. lane, Franklin began to take a closer interest in the landscape around him. Usually he was either too tired or too preoccupied to do more than think about his driving, but now he examined the expressway methodically, scanning the roadside cafes for any smaller versions of the new signs. A host of neon displays covered the doorways and windows, but most of them seemed innocuous, and he turned his attention to the larger billboards erected along the open stretches of the expressway. Many of these were as high as four-storey houses, elaborate three-dimensional devices in which giant glossy-skinned housewives with electric eyes and teeth jerked and postured around their ideal kitchens, neon flashes exploding from their smiles.

The areas on either side of the expressway were waste-land, continuous junkyards filled with cars and trucks, washing machines and refrigerators, all perfectly workable but jettisoned by the economic pressure of the succeeding waves of discount models. Their intact chrome hardly tarnished, the mounds of metal shells and cabinets glittered in the sunlight. Nearer the city the billboards were sufficiently close together to hide them, but now and then, as he slowed to approach one of the flyovers Franklin caught a glimpse of the huge pyramids of metal, gleaming silently like the refuse grounds of some forgotten

El Dorado.

That evening Hathaway was waiting for him as he came down the hospital steps. Franklin waved him across the court, then led the way quickly to his car.

"What's the matter, Doctor?" Hathaway asked as Franklin wound up the windows and glanced around the lines of parked

cars. "Is someone after you?"

Franklin laughed sombrely. "I don't know. I hope not, but if what you say is right, I suppose there is."

Hathaway leaned back with a chuckle, propping one knee up on the dashboard. "So you've seen something, Doctor, after all."

"Well, I'm not sure yet, but there's just a chance you may be right. This morning at the Fairlawne supermarket . . ." He broke off, uneasily remembering the huge blank sign and the abrupt way in which he had turned back to the supermarket as he approached it, then described his encounter.

Hathaway nodded slowly. "I've seen the sign there. It's big, but not as big as some that are going up. They're building them everywhere now. All over the city. What are you going

to do, Doctor ?"

Franklin gripped the wheel tightly. Hathaway's thinly veiled amusement irritated him. "Nothing, of course. Damn it, it may be just auto-suggestion, you've probably got me

imagining-"

Hathaway sat up with a jerk, his face mottled and savage. "Don't be absurd, Doctor! If you can't believe your own senses what chance have you left? They're invading your brain, if you don't defend yourself they'll take it over completely! We've got to act now, before we're all paralysed."

Wearily Franklin raised one hand to restrain him. "Just a minute. Assuming that these signs are going up everywhere, what would be their object? Apart from wasting the enormous amount of capital invested in all the other millions of signs and billboards, the amounts of discretionary spending power still available must be infinitessimal. Some of the present mortgage and discount schemes reach half a century ahead, so there can't be much slack left to take up. A big trade war would be disastrous."

"Quite right, Doctor," Hathaway rejoined evenly, "but you're forgetting one thing. What would supply that extra spending power? A big increase in production. Already they've started to raise the working day from twelve hours to fourteen. In some of the appliances plants around the city Sunday working is being introduced as a norm. Can you visualise it, Doctor—a seven-day week, everyone with at least three jobs."

Franklin shook his head. "People won't stand for it."

"They will. Within the last twenty-five years the gross national product has risen by fifty per cent, but so have the average hours worked. Ultimately we'll all be working and

spending twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. No one will dare refuse. Think what a slump would mean—millions of lay-offs, people with time on their hands and nothing to spend it on. Real leisure, not just time spent buying things." He seized Franklin by the shoulder. "Well, Doctor, are you going to join me?"

Franklin freed himself. Half a mile away, partly hidden by the four-storey bulk of the Pathology Department, was the upper half of one of the giant signs, workmen still crawling across its girders. The airlines over the city had deliberately been routed away from the hospital, and the sign obviously had no connection with approaching aircraft.

"Isn't there a prohibition on subliminal living? How can

the unions accept it?"

"The fear of a slump. You know the new economic dogmas. Unless output rises by a steady inflationary 5% the economy is stagnating. Ten years ago increased efficiency alone would raise output, but the advantages there are minimal now and only one thing is left. More work. Increased consumption and subliminal advertising, will provide the spur."

"What are you planning to do?"

"I can't tell you, Doctor, unless you accept equal responsi-

bility for it."

"Sounds rather Quixotic," Franklin commented. "Tilting at windmills. You won't be able to chop those things down with an axe."

"I won't try." Hathaway suddenly gave up and opened the door. "Don't wait too long to make up your mind, Doctor. By then it may not be yours to make up." With a wave he was gone.

On the way home Franklin's scepticism returned. The idea of the conspiracy was preposterous, and the economic arguments were too plausible. As usual, though, there had been a hook in the soft bait Hathaway dangled before him—Sunday working. His own consultancy had been extended into Sunday morning with his appointment as visiting factory doctor to one of the automobile plants that had started Sunday shifts. But instead of resenting this incursion into his already meagre hours of leisure he had been glad. For one frightening reason—he needed the extra income.

Looking out over the lines of scurrying cars, he noticed that at least a dozen of the great signs had been erected along the expressway. As Hathaway had said, more were going up everywhere, rearing over the supermarkets in the housing

developments like rusty metal sails.

Judith was in the kitchen when he reached home, watching the TV programme on the hand-set over the cooker. Franklin climbed past a big cardboard carton, its seals still unbroken, which blocked the doorway, kissed her on the cheek as she scribbled numbers down on her pad. The pleasant odour of pot-roast chicken—or, rather, a gelatine dummy of a chicken fully flavoured and free of any toxic or nutritional properties—mollified his irritation at finding her still playing the Spot Bargains.

He tapped the carton with his foot. "What's this?"

"No idea, darling, something's always coming these days, I can't keep up with it all." She peered through the glass door at the chicken—an economy 12-pounder, the size of a turkey, with stylised legs and wings and an enormous breast, most of which would be discarded at the end of the meal (there were no dogs or cats these days, the crumbs from the rich man's table saw to that) and then glanced at him pointedly.

"You look rather worried, Robert. Bad day?"

Franklin murmured noncommittally. The hours spent trying to detect false clues in the faces of the Spot Bargain announcers had sharpened Judith's perceptions, and he felt a pang of sympathy for the legion of husbands similarly outmatched.

"Have you been talking to that crazy beatnik again?"

"Hathaway? As a matter of fact I have. He's not all that crazy." He stepped backwards into the carton, almost spilling his drink. "Well, what is this thing? As I'll be working for the next fifty Sundays to pay for it I'd like to find out."

He searched the sides, finally located the label. "A TV set? Judith, do we need another one? We've already got three. Lounge, dining room, and the hand-set. What's the fourth for?"

"The guest room, dear, don't get so excited. We can't leave a hand-set in the guest room, it's rude. I'm trying to economise, but four TV sets is the bare minimum. All the magazines say so."

"And three radios?" Franklin stared irritably at the carton. "If we do invite a guest here how much time is he going to spend alone in his room watching television? Judith, we've got to call a halt. It's not as if these things were free, or even cheap. Anyway, television is a total waste of time. There's only one programme. It's ridiculous to have four sets."

"Robert, there are four channels."

"But only the commercials are different," Before Judith could reply the telephone rang. Franklin lifted the kitchen receiver, listened to the gabble of noise that poured from it. At first he wondered whether this was some off-beat prestige commercial, then realised it was Hathaway in a manic swing.

"Hathaway!" he shouted back. "Relax, man! What's

the matter now?"

"—Doctor, you'll have to believe me this time. I tell you I got on to one of the islands with a stroboscope, they've got hundreds of high-speed shutters blasting away like machineguns straight into people's faces and they can't see a thing, it's fantastic! The next big campaign's going to be cars and TV sets, they're trying to swing a two-month model change—can you imagine it, Doctor, a new car every two months? God Almighty, it's just—"

Franklin waited impatiently as the five-second commercial break cut in (all telephone calls were free, the length of the commercial extending with range—for long-distance calls the ratio of commercial to conversation was as high as 10:1, the participants desperately trying to get a word in edgeways to the interminable interruptions), but just before it ended he abruptly put the telephone down, then removed the receiver from the cradle.

Judith came over and took his arm. "Robert, what's the

matter? You look terribly strained."

Franklin picked up his drink and walked through into the lounge. "It's just Hathaway. As you say, I'm getting a little too involved with him. He's starting to prey on my mind."

He looked at the dark outline of the sign over the supermarket, its red warning lights glowing in the night sky. Blank and nameless, like an area forever closed-off in an insane mind, what frightened him was its total anonymity.

"Yet I'm not sure," he muttered. "So much of what Hathaway says makes sense. These subliminal techniques are

the sort of last-ditch attempt you'd expect from an over-

capitalised industrial system.3

He waited for Judith to reply, then looked up at her. She stood in the centre of the carpet, hands folded limply, her sharp, intelligent face curiously dull and blunted. He followed her gaze out over the rooftops, then with an effort turned his head and quickly switched on the TV set.

"Come on," he said grimly. "Let's watch television. God,

we're going to need that fourth set."

A week later Franklin began to compile his inventory. He saw nothing more of Hathaway; as he left the hospital in the evening the familiar scruffy figure was absent. When the first of the explosions sounded dimly around the city and he read of the attempts to sabotage the giant signs he automatically assumed that Hathaway was responsible, but later he heard on a newscast that the detonations had been set off by construction workers excavating foundations.

More of the signs appeared over the rooftops, isolated on the palisaded islands near the suburban shopping centres. Already there were over thirty on the ten-mile route from the hospital, standing shoulder to shoulder over the speeding cars like giant dominoes. Franklin had given up his attempt to avoid looking at them, but the slim possibility that the explosions might be Hathaway's counter-attack kept his suspicions

alive.

He began his inventory after hearing the newscast, discovered that in the previous fortnight he and Judith had traded in their

Car (previous model 2 months old)
2 TV sets (4 months)
Power mower (7 months)
Electric cooker (5 months)
Hair dryer (4 months)
Refrigerator (3 months)
2 radios (7 months)
Record player (5 months)
Cocktail bar (8 months)

Half these purchases had been made by himself, but exactly when he could never recall realising at the time. The car, for example, he had left in the garage near the hospital to be greased, that evening had signed for the new model as he sat

at its wheel, accepting the salesman's assurance that the depreciation on the two-month trade-in was virtually less than the cost of the grease-job. Ten minutes later, as he sped along the expressway, he suddenly realised that he had bought a new car. Similarly, the TV sets had been replaced by identical models after developing the same irritating interference pattern (curiously, the new sets also displayed the pattern, but as the salesman assured them, this promptly vanished two days later.)

Not once had he actually decided of his own volition that he wanted something and then gone out to a store and bought it!

He carried the inventory around with him, adding to it as necessary, quietly and without protest analysing these new sales techniques, wondering whether total capitulation might be the only way of defeating them. As long as he kept up even a token resistance, the inflationary growth curve would show a controlled annual 10% climb. With that resistance removed, however, it would begin to rocket upwards out of control . . .

Then, driving home from the hospital two months later, he

saw one of the signs for the first time.

He was in the 40 m.p.h. lane, unable to keep up with the flood of new cars, had just passed the second of the three clover-leaves when the traffic half a mile away began to slow down. Hundreds of cars had driven up on to the grass verge, and a large crowd was gathering around one of the signs. Two small black figures were climbing up the metal face, and a series of huge grid-like patterns of light flashed on and off, illuminating the evening air. The patterns were random and broken, as if the sign was being tested for the first time.

Relieved that Hathaway's suspicions had been completely groundless, Franklin turned off on to the soft shoulder, then walked forward through the spectators as the lights blinked and stuttered in their faces. Below, behind the steel palisades around the island, was a large group of police and engineers, craning up at the men scaling the sign a hundred feet over

their heads.

Suddenly Franklin stopped, the sense of relief fading instantly. With a jolt he saw that several of the police on the ground were armed with shot-guns, and that the two policeman climbing the sign carried submachine-guns slung over their shoulders. They were converging on a third figure, crouched by a switch-box on the penultimate tier, a ragged bearded man in a grimy shirt, a bare knee poking through his jeans.

Hathaway!

Franklin hurried towards the island, the sign hissing and

spluttering, fuses blowing by the dozen.

Then the flicker of lights cleared and steadied, blazing out continuously, and together the crowd looked up at the decks of brilliant letters. The phrases, and every combination of them possible, were entirely familiar, and Franklin knew that he had been reading them unconsciously in his mind for weeks as he passed up and down the expressway.

Sirens blaring, two patrol cars swung up on to the verge through the crowd and plunged across the damp grass. Police spilled from its doors, batons in their hands, quickly began to force back the crowd. Franklin held his ground as they approached, started to say: "Officer, I know the man—" but the policeman punched him in the chest with the flat of his hand. Winded, he stumbled back among the cars, leaned helplessly against a fender as the police began to break the windshields, the hapless drivers protesting angrily, those further back rushing for their vehicles.

The noise fell away abruptly when one of the submachineguns fired a brief roaring burst, then rose in a massive gasp of horror as Hathaway, arms outstretched, let out a cry of triumph

and pain, and jumped.

"But, Robert, what does it really matter?" Judith asked as Franklin sat inertly in the lounge the next morning. "I know it's tragic for his wife and daughter, but Hathaway was in the grip of an obsession. If he hated advertising signs so much why didn't he dynamite those we can see, instead of worrying so much about those we can't?"

Franklin stared at the TV screen, hoping the programme

would distract him.

"Hathaway was right," he said simply.

"Was he? Advertising is here to stay. We've no real freedom of choice, anyway. We can't spend more than we can

afford, the finance companies soon clamp down."

"You accept that?" Franklin went over to the window. A quarter of a mile away, in the centre of the estate, another of the signs was being erected. It was due east from them, and

in the early morning light the shadows of its rectangular superstructure fell across the garden, reaching almost to the steps of the french windows at his feet. As a concession to the neighbourhood, and perhaps to allay any suspicions while it was being erected by an appeal to petty snobbery, the lower sections had been encased in mock-Tudor panelling.

Franklin stared at it numbly, counting the half-dozen police lounging by their patrol cars as the construction gang unloaded prefabricated grilles from a couple of trucks. Then he looked at the sign by the supermarket, trying to repress his memories of Hathaway and the pathetic attempts the man had made to

convince Franklin and gain his help.

He was still standing there an hour later when Judith came in, putting on her hat and coat, ready to visit the supermarket. Franklin followed her to the door. "I'll drive you down

Franklin followed her to the door. "I'll drive you down there, Judith," he said in a flat dead voice. "I have to see about booking a new car. The next models are coming out at the end of the month. With luck we'll get one of the early deliveries."

They walked out into the trim drive, the shadows of the great signs swinging across the quiet neighbourhood as the day progressed, sweeping over the heads of the people on their way to the supermarket like the dark blades of enormous scythes.

J. G. Ballard

; ; ; Gone Away—No known address';

Subscribers are reminded to keep us informed of any change of address to ensure the safe delivery of their copies as far too many issues are returned by the Post Office marked as above. Overseas subscribers are particularly requested to let us known in good time.

Guest Editorial continued

So where does DISSOLUTION rear its watery head? And who gives twopence-worth of damns for COMPETITION?

Competition is the lifeblood of creation.

Is it?

Let's just take a look at what would happen if we ever did get on the Mainstream flow. Who'd benefit from higher circulations? Publishers, of course. With present figures of around 100,000 copies sold, they'd welcome any increase. And their editors, perhaps? And general staff. Higher salaries al 1 around . . .

And the writers, man! The editors would pay their s-f writers more!

Oh, no.

They'd pay their writers more. But those slick penmen wouldn't have the names you know: like Ashcroft, High, and Harding (With his 'sense-of-wonder' Late, and his brilliant Echo). And they wouldn't care the same; or have the same deep-rooted love of science-fiction, which is all that's going to stop the present atrophy.

The tug-of-war inside our medium is pulling it apart. The Mainstream advocates are killing it with DISSOLUTION.

Take up a copy of a heyday mag—Amazing Stories, Thrilling Wonder Stories, or Weird Tales—and read it through. Ignore the seeming clumsy style. Styles change. This is imaginative fiction. Bold.

And that's the road to rebirth.

Not downstream—but up. As far from high-cocked-little-finger literature as we can get. Yes, we want acceptance by the masses! Higher circulations, better rates for s-f writers—that would all be fine.

But we won't get it. Ever. Not without watering down, and watering down—until there's nothing left of our science-fiction.

We're just a tributary, sure. Our image might seem stupidly or nastily adolescent to the slickly-polished, regimented, Oxford-Cambridge mind. But the water is deep between the channels, and it's fresh and vigorous, and runs with real sincerity.

I'm a misfit in society—but I like it here !

How about you?



HARDCOVER - BRITISH

The Gollancz SF Choice for November just about qualifies by definition, is probably the best volume ever offered in this series, and its timely publication and remarkable value (a big 400 pages at a guinea) makes it the perfect festive present. This excellent book is an anthology, A Decade of Fantasy and Science Fiction, edited by Robert P. Mills (Victor Gollancz, 21/-). The magazine that has sustained eleven critically acclaimed annual collections of its "best," and can now provide a fresh collection of 24 stories not previously included, has been a well-received and recognised source of literary endeavour in fantasy since 1949. If its annual selections have been tantalising tasks, how much further heightened have been the difficulties of its later editor, Robert Mills, by the publication elsewhere in various anthologies—and therefore presently excluded—of many wonderful stories not previously selected by reasons of length or of a need to balance fantasy with science fiction?

Even so, such has been its continued excellence that this new "decade" can still provide such names as Asimov, Anderson, Bester and Sturgeon, Boucher & McComas (primus editors of F & S-F) Avram Davidson (present editorial incumbent) and such literary giants as—to name but a few—John Masefield, Howard Fast, Ogden Nash and John Collier. No need to mention specific titles, for here is the perfect assortment, something for every taste, whether for pure s-f or satirical extrapolations, for fantastic adventures or psychological experiment, for the merely sinister or nightmarish horror, and all so well written that dipping into the book experimentally will provide genuine diversified

pleasure.

Leslie Flood



2/6

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